

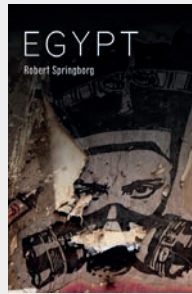
Egypt

By Robert Springborg

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The events that preceded and followed the downfall of then octogenarian Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 are tackled by Robert Springborg in the pithily book titled *Egypt*. The steady decline in Egypt's fortunes is unpacked in six chapters, while the causes for the continued staying power of the army is of especial importance. In the preface and chapter one, Springborg interweaves the historical record of Egypt's unity as a state and nation from antiquity (pp. xiii, 9-10) with topical questions about the "coup-volution" of 2011 (pp. 5-30). The failure of the popular uprising to translate into a democratic transition in Egypt is attributed to seven factors, including the country's population being "too rural" (p. 14) and the "shrinking demographic enclave" of the greatly vaunted middle class (p. 15). Existing problems, namely the longstanding squandering of Egypt's heritage by the military, were compounded by the coup-volution. Chapter two widens the analysis to the nature of the deep state. Gamal Abdel Nasser is credited with establishing the deep state as a limited access order that initiated a process of continuous decline (p. 33). The state, mired in a "socio-fiscal trap," began to be tasked to do more with dwindling revenues (pp. 44-45, 161). Three legs of the deep state are identified: the military, the presidency and intelligence services (p. 48). Frequent comparisons are made in chapter three between Mubarak, Anwar Sadat and Nasser on the one hand, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on the other hand, about



the preservation of their hold on power through coup-proofing (pp. 48-51). Chapter three is a foray into the "superstructural" institutions of the state controlled through the deep state's despotic power. A duopoly of sorts exists in the executive pitting of military officers against intelligence agents, thus ensuring that no single group is supreme over any other (pp. 74-75). An overstuffed judiciary, swinging from less to more autonomy, acts as a gatekeeper for the limited access order (pp. 88-89). Election laws provide the opportunity to filter out the opposition from parliament rather than meddling in election procedures (pp. 101-103).

Chapter four documents the enfeebling effects of the deep state on the virtually indistinguishable political and civil society. The el-Sisi regime's relations with the Coptic Church, al-Azhar, the Muslim Brotherhood, youth and students, labour and professional syndicates are examined with reference to the broad array of soft and hard tactics employed to maintain the limited access order. Chapter five consists of a stocktake of the impact of Republican Egypt's limited access order in a variety of areas. Three thwarted economic revolutions are identified by Springborg, from "green" agriculture to "grey" industrialisation to "brown" hydrocarbon (pp. 162-163). Increasingly worsening problems arising from a mistaken emphasis on food security to dwindling sources of foreign currency earnings, from rent-seeking to a rising population, have com-

bined to erode Egypt's hard and soft power. The continued securing of geo-strategic rents may very well rest on the threat that the state is "too-big-to-fail" (pp. 191-193). Springborg concludes *Egypt* with three hypothetical scenarios that forebode either a managed decline or a total collapse of state and society. These scenarios envisage a reinvigorated el-Sisi at the head of the regime, a coup d'état limiting power to the deep state, a "corrective revolution" empowering a civilian presidency or a more ominous "breakdown scenario."

What makes Springborg's observations a damning indictment of the state in Egypt is his unravelling of the façade of the appearance of the army as its disinterested custodian. North's limited access order (pp. 35-36) and Mann's despotic power (pp. 41-42) are deployed to analyze the Egyptian state in the republican era. The authoritarianism of Egypt's military rulers has long plagued the country's prospects for development and democratization. Despotic power and the limited access order both refer to historic phenomena: the pre-modern, supplanted by infrastructural power and the open access order; and the modern, respectively betraying a Eurocentric slant of an imagined history that alludes to a democratic West and a despotic East.¹ Contemporary Egypt's problems are in a literal sense the product of a frozen past. Springborg's language in the book is excessively dependent on what ought to be treated as ideal types that can be combined to illuminate the uneven facets of a complex entity rather than actually existing phenomena that are sharply discrete. His examination could just as seamlessly proceed without reference to either a limited access order or the notion of despotic power.

So-called despotic power may turn out to be a result of the modernizing of the state apparatus, to wit its techniques of discipline and

surveillance, traced back to Muhammad Ali Pasha and his inaptly named 'reforms.'² Since 1952, a military elite has contrived to corner and co-opt various civilian counter-elites. The "officers' republic" received a new lease on life following the 2011 coup-volution against Mubarak, a former air force officer, and the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi in July 2013. El-Sisi is observed by Springborg to share striking similarities to Nasser, notwithstanding the patent ideological and policy differences in the areas of brooking no opposition nor dissent and toward the Muslim Brotherhood, i.e. an iron fist shorn of a velvet glove (pp. 62-66, 151). Moreover, institutions such as the legislature and judiciary continue to fulfil a gatekeeping role that rewards acquiescence and loyalty and punishes or marginalizes dissent and opposition. An informal clientelist network of military officers and intelligence agents shadows the formal processes of the state, including 7 million civil servants employed in the executive branch (pp. 73-74), serving to undermine their ability of these civil servants to respond to the problems and crises of Egyptian society. The potentially illuminating concept of "political centrality," however, is belatedly introduced at the end of chapter three and is only descriptively mentioned (pp. 112-113).

Providing a useful counterpoint to Springborg's employment of the despotic state, one can turn to the concept of the "soft state" used by Galal Amin, the renowned late Egyptian intellectual. Informal acts such as negotiation and cunning among social actors displace the formal sphere in which the state shirks from its duties, a slide culminating in corruption becoming "a way of life" even with the façade of law.³ While the state of affairs in Egypt signals a narrowing of the political field, a process Springborg would argue is symptomatic of a limited access order, a thoroughly mod-

ern practice of power is the defining trait of the el-Sisi regime. Colonial techniques of violence aimed at 'natives' are reproduced in a post-colonial setting⁴ and reframed through the language of nationalism by an urban elite composed of military officers with a train of businessmen, journalists and civil servants. Springborg's well-honed examination would be more exacting if he shifted his focus to the colonial inception of the coercive apparatuses of the state complemented by a clientelist network uneasily kept afloat by rent-seeking. Although a great deal of Springborg's analysis is not based on primary research into the deep state, which under current circumstances would imperil the most audacious of researchers, he brings together past and recent works on the subject supplemented by index rankings in one book. *Egypt* makes an immense contribution to the study of the per-

sistence of the military's influence within the state in twenty-first century Egypt. It ought to be read by those who are earnestly interested in finding out how the Egyptian army emerged in politics to be supreme.

Endnotes

1. Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," *European Journal of Sociology*, 25/2 (1984), 185-213; Douglass C. North et al, "Limited Access Orders in the Developing World: A New Approach to the Problems of Development," *The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper* 4359 (2007), pp. 6-9.
2. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
3. Galal Amin, David Wilmsen (tr.), *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981-2011* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), pp. 7-19.
4. Yael Berda, "Managing Dangerous Populations: Colonial Legacies of Security and Surveillance," *Sociological Forum*, 28/3 (2013), pp. 627-630.