

Praise for Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism

“I read *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism* with a sigh of relief that understanding one of the most significant events in our contemporary history is in the caring and competent hands of some seminal critical thinkers. Dalia F. Fahmy and Daanish Faruqi have brought together a formidable volume challenging what they aptly call “Illiberal Intelligentsia” and gauge the future of the Egyptian democracy beyond and through their historic failures. What the community of critical thinkers gathered in this volume discover and discuss is no mere indictment of the Egyptian liberal intellectuals and their catastrophic failure at a crucial historic juncture, but something far more deeply troubling in the very nature of unexamined globalized liberalism. The result is a fiercely radical constellation of critical thinking indispensable for our understanding not just of Egypt and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world, but in fact the very legacy of liberalism in the 21st century.”

**Hamid Dabashi, Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies
and Comparative Literature, Columbia University**

“This edited volume is an essential contribution towards understanding the current state of affairs in Egypt. The different chapters offer a sense of the underlying dynamics at work within Egyptian society (among the military, the Muslim Brotherhood, secularists and the youth). The reader is invited to consider the complexity of the situation and what it will take for Egyptian people to find their way towards freedom and justice.”

**Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies,
University of Oxford**

“An extraordinary and wide-ranging exploration of the Arab Spring’s excitement and reversal in Egypt. Compulsory reading to grasp the role of Islam, secularism, authoritarianism and liberalism in contemporary Egypt.”

**Ebrahim Moosa, Professor of Islamic Studies, Keough School of
Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame**

“The question of democracy in Muslim societies has generated heated debate on the role of mainstream Islamist parties and democratization. Can they moderate their views? Will they respect electoral outcomes? Are they committed to political pluralism? The same questions, however, have been rarely asked of liberal and secular forces who occupy the same political space. This is precisely what is unique about this book. Focusing on Egypt’s Arab Spring democratic transition, it examines the political behavior of Egyptian liberals during the transition period and after the 2013 military coup. In doing so, the editors and contributors make an important and exceptional contribution to understanding both the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab-Islamic world and the obstacles to democracy. It is a must read volume that challenges stereotypes and deepens our grasp of the politics and societies of the Middle East.”

Nader Hashemi, Director of the Center for Middle East Studies, University of Denver, and author of *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*

“The heroic events of January and February 2011 seemed at first to rewrite the rules of Middle Eastern politics. One of the longest ruling autocrats in the Arab World fell not to a military coup, an assassination, or violent uprising, but to the immovable presence of the people demonstrating in public. The Tahrir Revolution was ‘liberal’ in the sense that its demands were for freedom, the rule of law, and social justice. Its promise was that these goals seemed to reflect a shared will uniting the secular and the Islamist, the masses and the middle class. Two short years later that promise was shattered in a supreme act of anti-political, counterrevolutionary violence. How did many Egyptian ‘liberals,’ who two years earlier stood side by side with Islamists against Mubarak in Tahrir, and one year earlier voted for Morsi for President, come to side with a return to military dictatorship over constitutional politics? *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism* brings together many of the best scholars on Egyptian politics to answer just this question.”

Andrew F. March, Associate Professor of Political Science, Yale University, and author of *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus*

Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism

—*Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of
Egyptian Democracy*—

Edited by

DALIA F. FAHMY &
DAANISH FARUQI

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To the people of Egypt

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While both of the editors are united by a deep love for and dedication to *umm ad-Dunya*, we also remain cognizant of the clear idiosyncrasies of each of our approaches and experiences – one a political scientist whose primary area of research has been, and continues to be, Islamist movements in Egypt, the other a historian of Islamic political thought whose work has in recent years veered away from Egypt proper but who out of conviction forcefully returned to debates he originally inaugurated while beginning his career in Egypt some eight years ago. Accordingly, we felt it appropriate to augment our collective acknowledgments above with separate words of recognition for those who made our project possible.

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All errors are ours alone.

1

Egyptian liberals, from revolution to counterrevolution

DAANISH FARUQI AND DALIA F. FAHMY

INTRODUCTION

Now six years since the popular uprising that ended the regime of longtime Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, many have argued that the liberatory sentiment that stoked the Tahrir Revolution in the first place is barely recognizable. Following a year of the admittedly incompetent rule of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohammad Morsi, the second uprising in July 2013 that brought down his rule ultimately gave rise to precisely the kind of authoritarianism Egyptian revolutionaries had been railing against in January 2011. Encapsulated most vividly by the Egyptian security forces' calculated slaughter of protesters on August 14, 2013 in Cairo's Rabaa Square,¹ the Egyptian police state

¹ Findings by Human Rights Watch, based on a year of investigation and research, conclude that key Egyptian leaders who oversaw the events at Rabaa are guilty of the "world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history" and should accordingly be tried for crimes against humanity. See Editorial Board, "Egypt should be a pariah state for its bloody crackdown on dissent," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/egypt-should-be-a-pariah-state-for-its-bloody-crackdown-on-dissent/2014/08/12/04a9cfd6-223a-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a_story.html; and Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt*, HRW, August 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

has returned with a vengeance. Under the stewardship of (now) President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, state repression has been escalated to levels hitherto unimaginable even during the Mubarak years, with not only suspected members of the Brotherhood, but Egyptian civil society more broadly, now subject to sweeping crackdowns.

As a preface, we cannot sufficiently emphasize that the ouster of Morsi was decidedly a *popular* coup. Even if the Tamarod (Rebel) movement that initially spearheaded the insurrection against Morsi in June 2013 ultimately exaggerated its claims to have collected twenty-two million signatures in opposition to Morsi's presidency, anti-Morsi sentiment in the months leading up to the June 30, 2013 uprising was deeply palpable. A sizeable constituency of the Egyptian public had indeed grown increasingly disillusioned with Morsi as their first elected leader, and feared his stewardship of the country now stood to violate the ideals of the uprising they had valiantly spearheaded in January 2011. Even the very revolutionary forces that were so instrumental in the fall of Mubarak concurred: major players in Egyptian civil society, including groups like Kifaya and the April 6th Youth Movement that played such a dominant role in the January 2011 uprising, had initially lent their support to the Tamarod campaign and its demand for early presidential elections.² In the face of such deep-seated anti-Morsi and anti-Brotherhood sentiment having permeated large contingents of Egyptian society, it is not altogether surprising that masses would enthusiastically cheer on the forcible removal of Morsi by the Egyptian military on July 3, 2013, or even then General Sisi's call later that month for a full "mandate" from the Egyptian people to combat terrorism – and thus embark on a systematic crackdown against Islamists tout court.³

Nonetheless, even if popular dissatisfaction with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood can conceivably excuse a critical mass of the Egyptian public for having lent its support to the early termination of the democratic experiment in Egypt, it does not sufficiently explain why a key contingent of Egypt's *liberals* succumbed to the same fate. Which is to say, an influential coterie of Egyptian liberal activists and intellectuals, who had earned their reputations as scions of protest and champions of democracy, civil

² Heba Afify, "The June 30 civilian alliance: A timeline of inception and erosion," *Mada Masr*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/june-30-civilian-alliance>

³ Kareem Fahim and Mayy El Sheikh, "Egyptian general calls for mass protest," *New York Times*, July 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/25/world/middleeast/egypt.html>

society, and human rights during the Mubarak years, ultimately reneged on those commitments in the aftermath of the events of June 2013 and onward. Departing from their previous personas, these heretofore liberal figures instead lent support – in many cases enthusiastic support – to the new authoritarian order under President Sisi. All hail from different and varying perspectives, but are united by having been self-identified as liberal, secular democrats, and rather iconic figures of the idea of secular liberalism in Egypt more broadly. Yet paradoxically, these same figures came to enthusiastically support the coup against Egypt’s first democratically elected president, and to continue that wave of support well into the point at which the new order under Sisi’s rampant illiberal repression – against Muslim Brotherhood supporters and beyond – was made readily apparent.

Briefly, before fully proceeding, we should clarify what we mean here by ‘liberal.’ Here we rely primarily on the benchmark of self-identification, but even then, what is the ‘liberalism’ to which Egyptian figures under consideration subscribe? Broadly speaking, these figures employ the term to refer to a political philosophy more immediately rooted in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Incubated in the context of feudalism and the arbitrary abuse of power by clerical authorities, liberalism as articulated by its most luminary figures such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others, articulated a worldview in which individual freedom became sacrosanct:

[They] envisioned a new world in which the arbitrary authority of the church and an arrogant aristocracy would cease to exist; a world in which reason and democracy would temper provincial ethnic and religious hatreds between states and races; a world of unfettered freedom, without radical differences in the distribution of wealth, in which an individual might better his lot through hard work and without fear of obstruction by the state.⁴

The individual thus became central to the liberal worldview, as a subject endowed with inviolable rights, and whose freedoms were to be protected at all costs, be it against the fetters of religious dogmatism or the invasive proclivities of the state apparatus. We will speak more about the history of liberalism as a philosophy in a subsequent section, but for now it should

⁴ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ideas In Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 26.

suffice to highlight its most salient attributes, in order to understand how the project reconstituted itself in Egypt, outside the immediately European cultural context in which it was originally conceived.

And in the Egyptian context, it is important to first preface that the liberals who form the basis of this study were not mere armchair intellectuals or fair-weather political activists. Figures of the persuasion we consider here had legitimately paid their dues in the pre-revolutionary context, many having faced serious persecution under Mubarak for their efforts at promoting democracy and the liberal rule of law. The prominent Egyptian journalist Ibrahim Eissa is a case in point: long a thorn in the side of the Mubarak regime, as editor of the opposition newspaper *al-Dustour*, Eissa was regularly harassed by the Egyptian courts for publishing allegedly subversive commentary – perhaps most famously in 2007, in which his article questioning then president Mubarak’s failing health earned him a year-long prison sentence. Insinuating that the Egyptian president had health problems, the charges against him stipulated, was tantamount to harming national security.⁵ Similarly, democracy and civil society activist Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim has been no stranger to the travesty of Egyptian justice, having spent several years languishing in Mubarak’s prisons on the dubious charge of defaming Egypt through his advocacy work at the Cairo-based democracy think tank he had founded, the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies.⁶ The famed Egyptian novelist Alaa al-Aswany and founder of the March 9th Movement for University Independence Dr. Mohammad Abol Ghar also fall into this cadre of liberal reformers: Aswany was a founding member of the Kifaya, Egyptian Movement for Change, protest movement, while Abol Ghar served as a spokesman for the National Association for Change led by Mohamed El Baradei, and following the 2011 revolution co-founded the Social Democratic Party, “what many viewed as the most substantial political party for liberals.”⁷

⁵ Heba Afify, “Ibrahim Eissa is ‘The Boss,’ but at what cost?” *Mada Masr*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/ibrahim-eissa-%E2%80%9Cboss%E2%80%9D-what-cost>

⁶ Bari Weiss, “A democrat’s triumphal return to Cairo,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2011, sec. Opinion, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703408604576164482658051692>

⁷ Joshua Hersh, “Portrait of a Cairo liberal as a military backer,” *New Yorker*, August 17, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/portrait-of-a-cairo-liberal-as-a-military-backer>

During their pre-revolutionary political careers, moreover, these liberal figures were quite nuanced in how they handled their associations with the Muslim Brotherhood. As avowedly secular figures, none was remotely sympathetic to Islamism as a political platform, but their opposition to the discourse of Islamism did not preclude them from accepting the Brotherhood as a reality in Egyptian political life. Ibrahim Eissa is perhaps more contentious than most liberals in this respect, having had a palpably antagonistic relationship with the role of religion in society even in his earlier career. As early as the nineties, Eissa published critiques of religious discourse, both in his expository writing in columns and books, as well as in a series of novels. But even then, as editor of *al-Dustour*, he allowed Muslim Brotherhood figures the opportunity to publish in his pages, and defended the group against state suppression. Arguing that the Brotherhood was “representative of Egypt’s class and cultural map,” in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising, Eissa celebrated their electoral wins, declaring as recently as October 2011 that “[i]f millions of Egyptian voters were to give the Muslim Brotherhood the majority in the elections...this would be majorly and abundantly beneficial.”⁸ Thus, as much opprobrium as Eissa may have heaped on Islamism as an ideological discourse, he nonetheless respected the Brotherhood’s role in Egyptian civil society.

Other liberals were even more forthcoming in their defense of the Brotherhood as a legitimate political force. Alaa al-Aswany in his pre-revolutionary writings stressed national unity despite ideological differences with the Brotherhood, reiterating in a column dated August 9, 2009, that it was the Mubarak regime that “has deliberately exaggerated the role and influence of the Muslim Brotherhood for use as a bogeyman against anyone who calls for democracy.”⁹ Even if the Brotherhood were to win fair elections, he maintained in a November 8, 2009 column, “wouldn’t that be the free choice of Egyptians, which we should respect if we are true democrats?”¹⁰ As for Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, perhaps the defining aspect of his career both as a sociologist and as a democracy activist has been his long-standing commitment to the *domestication* of the Brotherhood. The quintessential Arab democrat, having refined his ideas on Islamist

⁸ Afify, “Ibrahim Eissa is ‘The Boss,’ but at what cost?”

⁹ Alaa al-Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Made the Egyptian Revolution Inevitable* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

domestication through time spent with Brotherhood figures while in prison, Ibrahim has consistently maintained that allowing Islamists entry into the democratic process would liberalize their movement in the long term. Shortly after the 2011 revolution, Ibrahim analogized the Brotherhood to the Christian Democrats of Western Europe, arguing that “[t]hey started with more Christianity than democracy 100 years ago. Now they are more democracy than Christianity.”¹¹

Yet once the Muslim Brotherhood successfully entered the political arena, culminating in the election of Mohammad Morsi in June of 2012, these same figures radically shifted gears in their hitherto firm commitment to democratic reform. For all his bravado about considering a Brotherhood win in a fair election “majorly and abundantly beneficial,” Ibrahim Eissa ultimately proved unwilling to abide by his own dictum. His journalistic work now degenerated from cutting-edge dissident commentary to sycophantic pro-military propaganda, Eissa firmly backed the overthrow of Morsi on the paranoid premise that, as he lamented in a conversation with Negar Azimi of the *New Yorker*, “[w]e don’t want to turn into Iran.”¹² Elsewhere, in an interview Eissa expresses no sympathy for protesters who support the Brotherhood – an oblique reference to protesters massacred in Rabaa and al-Nahda squares – stating “[t]here is no such things as rights for terrorists[.]”¹³

So profound was his descent from being a champion of liberal values to his new persona as a political reactionary, Eissa went as far as to applaud the arrest of the April 6th Youth Movement founder Ahmed Maher, questioning the movement’s patriotism. The very political movement that played a defining role in the overthrow of Mubarak, Eissa now maintains, is so insufficiently loyal to Egypt as to warrant its founder languishing in prison for the next three years. Maher eventually responded, penning a bitter letter from prison to his erstwhile ally and comrade in the revolution: “Addressed to ‘Hima,’ the affectionate nickname activists used to have for Eissa, the letter states: ‘He says that we are wavering, even though our

¹¹ Weiss, “A democrat’s triumphal return to Cairo.”

¹² Negar Azimi, “The Egyptian Army’s unlikely allies,” *New Yorker*, January 8, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-egyptian-armys-unlikely-allies>

¹³ Quoted in Mayy El Sheikh, “A voice of dissent in Egypt is muffled, but not silent,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/world/middleeast/an-egyptian-voice-of-dissent-is-muffled-but-not-silenced.html>

positions are constant and his change every few months. Not only his positions – Eissa’s core values change, his principles and convictions.”¹⁴

Other liberal figures in this vein similarly followed suit. Alaa al-Aswany’s ballyhooed portrayals of then General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as “a national hero” were matched only by his disdain for the Brotherhood, as he revealed in conversation with the *New Yorker*: “They are like a bad version of Don Quixote because they live in history. They believe they were chosen by God to restore the glory of their religion. This type of fascism is very, very dangerous.”¹⁵ Not to be outdone in braggadocio on behalf of the counterrevolutionary regime, Mohammad Abol Ghar unreservedly justified this circumvention of the democratic process by invoking alleged corollaries in American history: “Would the Americans have been willing to wait four years for Nixon to finish his term?” Aboul-Ghar asked... ‘And remember, Nixon did much less than Morsi did.’”¹⁶

And as for Saad Eddin Ibrahim, even the Arab world’s arguably most prominent democrat, who only years earlier had aggressively lobbied on Capitol Hill to convince American lawmakers to force the Mubarak regime to grant political space for the Brotherhood, ultimately capitulated to lend his enthusiastic support to the overthrow of Morsi, going so far as to support then General Sisi’s presidential ambitions. Ibrahim proved wholly unapologetic for this seeming about-face, citing that experience has matured his political thinking: “I have no regrets whatsoever,” said the seventy-five-year-old director of the Ibn Khaldun Center – which has backed democracy since he founded the group in 1988 – of his advocacy for the once powerful Islamist group he now opposes. “My perspective evolved.”¹⁷

Interestingly enough, though, in the years following the events of July 2013, several of these same liberal figures have increasingly backtracked from or made concessions to their otherwise stalwart support of the military establishment. In the case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, it seems that he has had a bona fide change of heart; in an interview in November 2015, Ibrahim adopts a style far more reminiscent of his pre-2013 persona,

¹⁴ Afify, “Ibrahim Eissa is ‘The Boss,’ but at what cost?”

¹⁵ Azimi, “The Egyptian Army’s unlikely allies.”

¹⁶ Hersh, “Portrait of a Cairo liberal as a military backer.”

¹⁷ Matt Bradley, “Military Regime Draws Support From Egypt’s Liberals,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2014, sec. World, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303819704579316684260794724?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303819704579316684260794724.html>

now urging the Sisi regime to reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood, emphasizing that “[t]he state should embrace these people one way or another. They are political cadres, and are not ignorant. Conflict with them will exhaust resources and shed the blood of citizens. It threatens us with a civil war and therefore reconciling with the Brotherhood is a must before matters develop into what is worst.”¹⁸

Similarly, Alaa al-Aswany has become increasingly critical of the Sisi regime in his writings, to the point that the state has censored both his public seminars in Cairo and his writings in state-run media. Yet Aswany has been more reserved than Ibrahim, maintaining that he continues to support the state’s “fight against terrorism,” with the caveat that this does not justify dictatorship.¹⁹ If Aswany’s case is any indication, liberal support for the military apparatus is no guarantee of immunity against that apparatus turning its guns on its very enablers – a fate that has also recently befallen Ibrahim Eissa, who in early January 2016 was under criminal investigation by Egyptian prosecutors for allegedly insulting the judiciary in an article published in the *Al-Maqqal* newspaper he edits.²⁰ Now cognizant of his own vulnerability, even as a stalwart supporter who initially hailed Sisi’s rise as “a day of joy, a day of victory, a day of dignity, a day of pride, the day Egypt and its people were victorious,” Eissa has since begun to more directly challenge his erstwhile hero: “What happened exactly to make our nation turn around with you to the ear of searching consciences, putting minds on trial and imprisoning writers and authors?”²¹

Still, other liberal figures have been less sanguine, having held firm in their belief that the existential threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood and by “terrorism,” nebulously defined, necessitates the current regime’s

¹⁸ “Sa’ad Al-Din Ibrahim: Either we reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood or go to civil war,” *Middle East Monitor*, November 15, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20151115-sa-ad-al-din-ibrahim-either-we-reconcile-with-the-muslim-brotherhood-or-go-to-civil-war>

¹⁹ Marcia Lynx Qualey, “Egypt shuts down novelist Alaa Al-Aswany’s public event and media work,” *Guardian*, December 11, 2015, sec. Books, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/11/egypt-shuts-down-novelist-alaa-al-aswanys-public-event-and-media-work>

²⁰ “Egypt sentences journalists to prison for ‘publishing false news’ – Committee to Protect Journalists,” accessed January 19, 2016, <https://www.cpj.org/2016/01/egypt-sentences-journalists-to-prison-for-publishi.php>

²¹ Quoted in Ahmed Aboulenein, “As hard times hit, Egyptians at last find fault with Sisi,” *Reuters*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-politics-idUSKCN0WD15X>

crackdown on Egyptian civil society. On this, Mohammad Abol Ghar is quite forthcoming, declaring in a November 2015 interview that all Egyptians are united behind the state, and that the democratic process can and should allow the Egyptian people the right to curtail rights and freedoms as the national interest dictates:

Democracy means communal participation in decision-making, which is different from talking about ‘rights and freedoms.’ And if democracy is achieved, then the Egyptian masses [have the prerogative to] decide at a certain moment that we cannot grant freedoms one hundred percent in the name of [achieving] the national interest, as circumstances require.²²

More recently, in March 2016, Abol Ghar authored a column lamenting the state of the country, in which he goes as far as to accuse Sisi of presiding over a broken political process, and over a police force that cavalierly beats and tortures. But his ire here directed at his former “Redeemer and Savior” is largely economic, decrying the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in contradistinction to the dollar, and Sisi’s recklessness in commissioning large projects (ostensibly referring to the Suez Canal expansion) without having done the due diligence to assess their economic viability.²³ While Abol Ghar does offer some interspersed critiques of political repression, the tenor of his missive here suggests that, per his December 2015 article, circumscribing political freedoms would nonetheless still qualify as within the ambit of national interest, were Sisi’s repressive rule to have brought economic prosperity to the country. Only in the face of the threat of economic failure, and the concomitant departure of foreign companies and international credit lines, does Abol Ghar begin to reconsider his commitments to political and intellectual freedom – and by extension, to the core vision undergirding the Egyptian revolution of 2011, and to the principles that he himself articulated in his advocacy for academic freedom through the March 9th Movement for University Independence, and in his work as spokesman for the National Association for Change alongside El Baradei.

²² Karima’Abd al-Ghani, “Abol Ghar li’al-Ahram: Qalb al masriyiin jami’an ma’ al-dawla,” *Al-Ahram Online*, November 13, 2015, <http://www.ahram.org/NewsQ/453551.aspx>

²³ Mohammad Abol Ghar, “Hazin ‘alaika ya watani,” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/906019>

What happened, then, to the liberal experiment in Egypt? How could intellectuals and activists so demonstrably committed to the cause of civil society, freedom, and democracy in Egypt – indeed, to the very impulses that inspired the 2011 uprising – come to abandon those commitments? How could the guardians of liberal values in Egypt ultimately embolden the nation's recidivism into authoritarian rule? Or, put another way, how could liberals in Egypt ultimately give rise to outright *illiberal* proclivities? It is this question that *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism* seeks to critically address.

Having said that, doing full justice to the issue of Egypt and the contradictions of liberalism requires a systematic approach that goes beyond the career of this or that contemporary liberal figure. Liberalism in Egypt was and remains part of a deep historical trajectory stretching back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which produced an intellectual and philosophical legacy that continues to inform even the liberals of today. Moreover, the key intellectuals and activists associated with early Egyptian liberalism attempted to cement their political project through the cultivation of liberal *institutions*, the legacy of which bears direct ramifications for the failures of the contemporary liberal project. Thus, to fully disentangle the illiberal proclivities of modern Egyptian liberalism, we must situate it in the intellectual history of the Egyptian liberal tradition more broadly, and, equally important, with the institutional legacy that tradition produced. It is to this question that we shall now turn.

THE GENEALOGIES OF EGYPTIAN LIBERALISM

In May 2003, two months after officially being cleared by the Egyptian Court of Cassation of all charges against him and subsequently released from prison, Saad Eddin Ibrahim spoke at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington DC about his experiences under incarceration. Despite having languished in Mubarak's prisons to the point that his health had been irreparably damaged, Ibrahim delivered a message of optimism, assuring his audience that a democratic Egypt was wholly within the realm of possibility – because Egyptian society had an immanent tradition that articulated precisely the values of freedom and justice on which a democratic order is ultimately based. Referring to the Liberal Age – a term

he borrows from the intellectual historian Albert Hourani²⁴ – Ibrahim harkens back to a period of nascent intellectual freedom and prosperity in Egypt stretching from, by his chronology, 1850 until its untimely demise with the rise of Nasser in 1952. Despite its early termination, Ibrahim maintains that the Liberal Age planted the seeds for the cultivation of democratic governance and a robust civil society in Egypt. Reviving this immanent discourse of the Liberal Age, then, is Ibrahim’s solution to the authoritarian impasse facing Egypt:

When we founded the Ibn Khaldun Center and as we guided its work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, we had the Liberal Age very much in mind. We saw ourselves not as builders from scratch, but as revivers of a great (but not perfect) tradition that had existed not only in our own country but also in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, and elsewhere. We were and remain determined that this liberal tradition – and the Egyptian Court of Cassation, as witnessed in our legal case, is part of this legacy – will not be forgotten. We believe that if these ideas receive the exposure they deserve, the memory of this tradition and, more importantly, the still-living relevance of its core teachings on rights, freedom, transparency, and justice can play a large role in showing that democracy does indeed have a reasonable chance of putting down roots and growing in the Middle East.²⁵

The Liberal Age began as part of a broader movement known as the Arab Renaissance, or the *Nahda*, largely in response to European material ascendancy over Muslim lands. Initially, the *Nahda* gave rise to a form of Islamic liberalism, with figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) seeking to reorient the Islamic tradition to its rationalist roots, thus making Islam more congruent with the needs of the modern world. Islamic liberalism then gave rise to a “humanist liberalism,” built on largely European auspices.²⁶ Many leading early liberals

²⁴ See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁵ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, “Reviving Middle Eastern liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 4 (October 2003): 9–10.

²⁶ Jamal Mohammed Ahmed, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 43.

like Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (d. 1963), Taha Husayn (d. 1973), and others began as students of Abduh on the one hand, and went on to study in Europe on the other hand. For whatever the divergences in their positions, a critical mass of this early generation of Egyptian liberals were formatively shaped by insights they acquired in Europe: Taha Husayn went so far as to insist that “[i]n order to become equal partners in civilization with the Europeans, we must literally and forthrightly do everything that they do.”²⁷ It is under these auspices, having imbibed the tenets of liberal philosophy in Europe, that liberal thinkers in Egypt attempted to forge a new vision for an Egyptian consciousness, as the basis for what became early Egyptian territorial nationalism. It is this vision, moreover, that Ibrahim is seeking to revive as a basis of democratic reform.

Given the centrality of European liberal thought to the Egyptian encounter with liberalism, moreover, it behooves us to briefly consider the experience of liberalism in Western history, in order to do full justice to the Egyptian Liberal Age it helped inspire. Again, liberalism as a political philosophy ultimately ascribed primacy to the individual against the caprices of the arbitrary exercise of power, namely from feudal authorities on the one hand and an overzealous church on the other. Early liberal thinkers thus grounded the political community they envisioned not in some placation to history, myth, or religious dogma, but instead to universal values predicated on reason, that “made certain abstract assumptions about human nature, linked them with the interests that might bring individuals together in a political community, and drew the institutional consequences.”²⁸

For Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679), these liberal universals were articulated through a hypothetical “state of nature” that otherwise sought to wreak havoc on the lives of individuals caught in its crosshairs. As rational actors interested in self-preservation, Hobbes maintained, individuals would willingly surrender autonomy to a powerful sovereign, which would in turn be tasked with ensuring the safety necessary for the individuals under its stewardship, such that they can properly maximize their own liberties unencumbered by the threat of the ongoing anarchy of the state of nature. The sovereign for Hobbes is depersonalized, such

²⁷ Taha Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954), 15, quoted in Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 42.

²⁸ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 43.

that public existence is made wholly distinct from private existence: "The state stands over and apart from the personal interests defining civil society while law becomes external to the individuals who make up the community."²⁹ The depersonalized state, thus, can serve as an impartial arbiter of grievances and disputes among individuals, who are all (*de jure*) equal before a liberal rule of law applied uniformly to each constituent of the political community.

The dilemma in Hobbes's vision was that it gave rise to absolutism; his understanding of sovereignty was so all-encompassing that he opposed the ability of individual liberal subjects to make claims against the state. Put another way, Hobbes's sovereign was one largely unencumbered by accountability to the individuals under its jurisdiction, so long as it continued to fulfill its perfunctory obligation to guarantee their immediate safety. John Locke (d. 1704) recalibrated the liberal community to ground citizenship not on self-preservation, but on property rights; so long as citizenship was based on property, he surmised, individuals as rational actors would largely go about their business, and through self-interest would maximize their own liberties. The state's sovereignty, then, would be circumscribed, engaging only in central administration while leaving private interests governed by civil society otherwise unhindered.

Moreover, Locke saw the sovereign as accountable to the governed, through an emphasis on constitutionalism and legislature clearly delineating equality under the law and formal recognition of reciprocity. The liberal rule of law, as envisioned by Locke, was not a tool of constraint, but one operating in the *preservation* of freedom, which "anchors the particular, protects the exercise of 'difference,' rather than serves as the justification for squashing it."³⁰ This concern with the protection of difference is perhaps most palpable in Locke's famous *Letter on Toleration* (1690), in which he emphasizes religious tolerance as the only prudent option available in light of sectarianism produced by the Protestant Reformation on the one hand, and the dogmatism of the Catholic Church on the other.

The liberal vision, as articulated by its key theorists such as Locke, was predicated on "the moral responsibility of the individual for his or her fate, the radical implications of the division between church and state,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

and the insistence that the grievances of the weak and exploited demand the institutional possibility of redress.”³¹ That said, the blueprint for this formula was certainly recalibrated with each passing generation of liberal theorists – T. H. Green (d. 1882), in contradistinction to figures like Locke, saw a role for state intervention in the advancement of liberty, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (d. 1778) grounded citizenship not in property rights but on what he termed the “general will,” to name a few tangents on which the liberal vision has traversed. But these broader commitments, to the advancement of the liberty of the individual, to an articulation of state sovereignty specifically as a means of preserving individual liberty, and to the rule of law, have continued to play a formative role in the liberal worldview. And it is precisely these commitments, as Saad Eddin Ibrahim articulates, that helped inform the Liberal Age in Egypt.

Two of Ibrahim’s observations here prove especially salient. First, the Liberal Age left behind an inheritance of *ideas*, replete with “core teachings on rights, freedom, transparency, and justice.” Perhaps most central to that intellectual legacy, for our purposes, was a commitment to *secularism*. Keeping in mind the centrality of the separation of religion and the state in the European liberal worldview – owing in large part to the environment of religious sectarianism in which figures like John Locke immediately found themselves – it makes perfect sense that Egyptian figures deeply informed by European liberal thought would adopt a similar attitude toward religion. Thus, relying on antecedents in European liberal philosophy, major figures of the early Liberal Age largely rejected religion as a legitimate basis of political action. Figures like Lutfi al-Sayyid were quite obstinate in this respect, explicitly seeking to delink the Egyptian nationalist movement from the Arab and Islamic intellectual heritage altogether; this militant strand of secularism in early Egyptian liberal thought ultimately coalesced in the revival of Pharaonism as the basis of Egyptian territorial nationalism – which also served as a basis of situating Egypt as a legitimate heir to Western civilization, given ancient Egypt’s connections to the Hellenic world.³²

Having said that, this rigid commitment to secularism should not be viewed as a purely uninterrupted linear development in Egyptian liberalism. Indeed, as much as figures like Lutfi al-Sayyid wholly excised

³¹ Ibid., 51.

³² For more on early Egyptian liberal flirtations with Pharaonism as the basis of Egyptian nationalism, see Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

religion from their political project, contemporaneous Egyptian figures associated with the Liberal Age like Qasim Amin (d. 1908), Huda Sha'rawi (d. 1947), Saad Zaghlul (d. 1927), and others attempted to articulate campaigns of some kind of liberal reform, while giving at least a perfunctory acknowledgment to Egypt's Arab and Islamic heritage. Others conceived their political projects under explicitly secular auspices, to later incorporate Islamic themes (*Islamiyyat*) into their writings – most famously Muhammad Husayn Haykal (d. 1956).³³ Moreover, subsequent generations of liberals proved more ambitious than their predecessors in this respect, with liberals of the generation following 1967 having been willing to actively engage rather than cavalierly elide the Arab-Islamic heritage (*turath*): “In contrast to the earlier liberal writers, their defiant discourse sought the deconstruction of Islamic tradition and the establishment of a dynamic civic polity by focusing explicitly on the core of Muslim consciousness – the Qur'an – and transforming it from a divine and legal text into a more historical text.”³⁴

Suffice to say, rather than constituting a narrow linear trajectory, Egyptian liberalism's relationship with religion has evolved with each passing generation. Nonetheless, liberalism in Egypt from its early antecedents to the present has remained largely committed to some understanding of secularism – which by extension deeply informs liberal antagonism toward Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood. To be fair, some of these fears were well founded, as liberal figures did indeed find themselves caught in Islamist crosshairs throughout modern Egyptian history – the murder of Egyptian secularist Farag Foda in 1992 by members of al-Gama'aa al-Islamiyya would be a case in point. But what is especially germane for our purposes in this discussion is that the early Liberal Age's commitments to wholly excising religion from public life continued to play a palpable

³³ Haykal's turn to *Islamiyyat* became the subject of considerable contention in Western historiographical debates. Most notably, Nadav Safran categorized Haykal's embrace of Islamic themes as indicative of a “crisis of orientation,” whereby Egyptian liberalism was being thrown off course from its secular foundations to instead come to embrace reactionary religious proclivities. That thesis has been thoroughly problematized in subsequent generations of scholarship – and is addressed in detail in Joel Gordon's chapter in this volume, “Egypt's New Liberal Crisis.” For more on the original “crisis of orientation” thesis, see Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community: An Analysis of the Intellectual and Political Evolution of Egypt, 1804–1952* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

³⁴ Meir Hatina, “Arab Liberal Thought in Historical Perspective,” in *Arab Liberal Thought After 1967: Old Dilemmas, New Perceptions*, ed. Meir Hatina and Christoph Schumann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 28.