

Barry Rubin, Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics (London: Macmillan, 1990, 178pp.).

This book is devoted to an examination of the political positions of Egyptian fundamentalists groups and their chances for seizing power. Barry Rubin, a prolific writer on Middle Eastern politics, attempts to analyze the history, structure, ideology and impact of these groups in a country which he considers to be "the most important in the Arab world." (p. vii).

The author is particularly preoccupied with the question of why these movements have not fared any better. Two propositions are put forward. The first concerns the internal dynamics of the Islamicist camp. Rubin contends that far from forming a homogeneous collectivity, the fundamentalist camp is ripped with deep ideological and political differences. To demonstrate his point he identifies four major sub-groups to whom he devotes a separate chapter each. These forces consist respectively of the mainstream clergy (*ulama*) who are pro-government; the Muslim Brotherhood who pursue a peaceful electoral strategy; the still developing Jam'iyat which tend to be active student organizations trying to ignore the government; and finally the radical Jama'at which consists of organizations that advocate a violent revolution.

Rubin maintains that the popularity of these groups can be ranked in the descending order by which they were listed above (p. 92). Besides differing in their political platforms, these four contenders also disagree on their interpretation of Islam and the social ills that are besetting Egyptian society. According to Rubin, the more radical of the four groupings, i.e. the Jam'iyat and the Jama'at, have failed to build a broad base of support for their cause due to the rigid, intolerant and violent nature of their views. He considers their brand of Islam to be non-appealing and alien to most Egyptians.

Secondly, Rubin attributes the failure of the fundamentalist project to the present government's ability to coopt reformers, suppress protesters and repress violent revolutionaries (p. 137). Like his predecessors, Nasir and Sadat, who played the fundamentalists card against the left, Mubarak continues this Machiavellian game of playing one side against the other. This time the official ulama are positioned against the radicals. Part of the credit for the success so far of

Mubarak's cunning game can be attributed to the fact he has allowed various parties to operate, albeit within limits. This moderate and flexible approach, the author contends, has guaranteed the durability of the present regime for the foreseeable future.

Rubin's overall conclusion is that while the Islamic fundamentalist groups have managed to become the main opposition force and are disruptive politically (as demonstrated by Sadat's assassination), it is very unlikely that they can seize the machinery of government "in the short-to medium-term future". Their angry rhetoric, simplistic remedies and muddled picture of what an ideal Islamic polity should look like have all contributed to their failure.

While this reviewer agrees with the author's conclusions, I believe the book leaves much to be desired. The compact nature of the book, which had began as a research project for the Orkand Corporation, does not allow the author to treat these movements in any great depth. Furthermore, Rubin does not effectively combine history with an analysis of social structures or cultural concerns. The crucial socioeconomic ramifications of Nasir's state capitalist model or Sadat's open door policy (*infitah*) are nowhere discussed. Although references are made to the fundamentalists proclivity toward provincialism, isolationism and non-alignment in foreign policy, no real appreciation is shown for the fact that Islam satisfies their longings for cultural authenticity and nationalist identity.

Another possible line of criticism is that the book does not provide the reader with a holistic understanding of the Egyptian political panorama. The emphasis on treating the fundamentalist groups has come at the expense of discussing any aspect of the dialectical relationship that bounds these groups to their secular nemesis such as the liberal Wafdists, the Nasirists, the secularists or the communist left. A final omission of the book is that it does not discuss the prospects for the future of Islamic reformism and by extension political liberalism in Egypt.

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