

competition' discourse on the rise, Williams' book is a timely reminder of the dangers inherent in Cold War mentalities. US officials working on Africa would do well to remind themselves of America's not-too-distant past.

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Azmi Bishara, *Egypt: Revolution, Failed Transition and Counter-Revolution*. London: I. B. Tauris (hb £90 – 978 0 7556 4590 9). 2022, 731 pp.

This impressively detailed work of scholarship represents a rich resource for anyone looking to understand the political dynamics of the revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt. Bishara draws on a wide array of sources, including interviews and focus groups with protagonists as well as news reports, books and reports in English and Arabic. The text is clearly and directly written, engaging thoroughly with the academic literature around democratic transitions without drowning in jargon or descending into scholasticism.

Evidently any short review of a work of 700 pages is going to miss out on a great deal, so I will concentrate here on the crux of Bishara's argument and its political implications. His core concern is to assess what went wrong in the 'failed transition' and draw up a balance sheet of the role of key protagonists. The act of revolutionary drama that culminated in the removal of Mubarak by his own generals on 11 February 2011 had a dual nature, Bishara argues:

The first was a broad, popular, civil revolution with a democratic character. The second was a military coup carried out by the army against Mubarak. We might say that the history of the post-revolutionary transitional period is the history of a struggle between the revolution and the covert coup. In the end, it was the coup that triumphed. (p. 360)

The dual character of the transitional period reflected the interaction of two powerful features in the new political landscape: 'the control of the military and the powerful entry of the Egyptian people into the public sphere and spaces' (p. 370). As Bishara notes, the novelty lay in the emergence of 'the people' as a political actor. 'This was a totally new variable. The question now was whether that force in the public sphere called "the people" would support democratization or turn conservative, fearful of stability repelled by the anarchy of change' (p. 370).

So why did things go wrong from the point of view of ensuring a democratic transition? Bishara explores several interrelated factors. The 'revolutionary forces' were not only taken by surprise by the onset of a revolutionary situation and had no plan for the 'day after' (p. 368); they also 'did not possess sufficient knowledge about how the state and its agencies worked, which for the army

was familiar territory' (p. 376). Bishara is also scathing about the failures of the major opposition forces, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, which formed alliances with anti-democratic Salafist parties, introducing 'a dynamic of political one-upmanship that pulled the Brotherhood towards ideological extremism' (p. 363). The army was also much more adept at forming effective political coalitions than any of the opposition parties. The parties ended up polarized against one another along an ideological fault line, which sapped any hope of establishing democratic institutions. (The non-Islamist opposition, in particular, played with fire by calling on the military to remove an elected president when they decided they disagreed with him.)

The problem here is that Bishara's prescription for a different strategy ignores his most acute insight: it was the emergence of 'the people' as a political actor that had the potential to change the terrain on which politics was conducted. He remains focused on what 'the elite' should have done better, such as taking the lead 'in defining the democratic system under which elections will be held' (p. 373). By contrast, Bishara argues, the people should have stopped organizing protests and strikes, delegating the moral authority of the unity forged in symbolic sites of contestation, such as Tahrir Square, to others (p. 385).

Yet it was precisely through protests, and especially in the burgeoning strike movement, that a popular practice of democracy was emerging. Striking workers held their own negotiators to account by agreeing on demands at mass meetings, in the process forcing concessions from a recalcitrant state by democratic means. In at least a small number of cases, they expanded democracy from the realm of politics into the workplace by establishing a degree of participatory control over management. Strikes were also the primary means by which the cronies of the old ruling party were dislodged from office throughout the public sector. In some cases, this forced the removal of military figures from leadership positions in the civilian apparatus of the state. In Alexandria, local government workers elected the first civilian head of a local council from among their ranks in July 2011. At the same time, strikes and protests by workers at Cairo airport forced the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to appoint a civilian director for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of other revolutions in the region, such as those in Tunisia and Sudan, also points to the potential for trade unions to play a central role in the struggle for democracy (see the examples of the Tunisian General Labour Federation and the Sudanese Professionals Association, respectively). And in the Sudanese case, other revolutionary organizations – such as the neighbourhood resistance committees – expanded the popular practice of democracy further, while elite politicians have sought accommodation and compromise with the military leaders who would crush it.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of this work will be appreciated at many levels, however, and part of its value lies in making Bishara's formidable scholarship accessible to

<sup>1</sup> A. Alexander (2022) *Revolution Is the Choice of the People: crisis and revolt in the Middle East and North Africa*. London: Bookmarks, p. 382; A. Alexander and M. Bassiouny (2014) *Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: workers and the Egyptian revolution*. London: Zed Books, pp. 299–300.

<sup>2</sup> W. Berridge, J. Lynch, R. Makawi and A. De Waal (2022) *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy: the promise and betrayal of a people's revolution*. London: Hurst.

a non-Arabic-speaking audience. It is likely to become an essential reference point for academic analysis of the Egyptian revolution while also serving as a detailed but highly readable introduction for students, journalists and policymakers.

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Sebatatso C. Manoeli, *Sudan's 'Southern Problem': Race, Rhetoric and International Relations, 1961–1991*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (hb £64.99 – 978 3 030 28770 2; pb £44.99 – 978 3 030 28773 3). 2019, 245 pp.

While many African states were celebrating the fruits of independence by the end of the 1950s, some were facing national challenges because of their colonial heritage. One of the colonial problems that has shaped modern-day postcolonial Africa is the concept of the nation state. Many scholars have challenged the applicability of the nation state to the African context, but few have highlighted the challenges that post-independence African elites faced while attempting to create a nation state. Sebatatso Manoeli's brilliant book, *Sudan's 'Southern Problem'*, sheds light on competing Sudanese political narratives about the so-called 'Southern Problem'. The author argues that elites from North and South Sudan utilized Third World solidarity discourse to their advantage vis-à-vis the North–South conflict. While the Southern Sudanese civil war has been broadly studied through a military and humanitarian lens, Manoeli focuses on the diplomatic discourse used by each side. Competing narratives by the government and rebel groups of the South were essential in shaping conditions on the ground and securing international support and legitimacy worldwide.

Manoeli organizes her analysis of archival and oral accounts of the discursive battle between the government and rebel groups into eleven chapters. The first four chapters outline the colonial history of the 'Southern Problem' and examine different narratives from both sides. The following two chapters show how these competing narratives were received in regional and international circles. The author then discusses two significant periods in Sudanese political history, when Mohamed Mahgoub in the 1960s and Ja'afar Nimeiri in the 1970s utilized anti-colonial sentiments and socialist networks to gain an international lead over the rebel groups. The final two chapters focus on the repositioning of the rebels' discourse in the light of the second civil war, which constructed a credible image abroad.

However, the book's tremendous significance is in uncovering the replication of colonial discourse by elites from both sides of this conflict. For example, the leadership of the Sudan African National Union (SANU) reproduced colonial categories in their representation of the South (p. 34). Similarly, the government's quest for national unity and social coherence, which marginalized ethnic languages and cultures, reproduced colonial practices in South Sudan (pp. 51–2). African liberation leaders aimed to liberate African territories from colonial presence; however, as Manoeli