



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

New Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/>

Review of Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*

Author(s): Jérôme Drevon

To cite this article: Drevon, Jérôme, review of Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), *New Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2013), < <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1207>>

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1207>

Online Publication Date: 18 November 2013

Disclaimer and Copyright

The NMES editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the e-journal. However, the editors and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2013. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

Terms and conditions:

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt

Lisa Blaydes

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 288 pp., \$87.41 / £62.35, Hardback,
ISBN: 978-1-107-00055-1

REVIEWED BY JEROME DREVON

PhD Candidate, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University; email:
jerome.drevon@durham.ac.uk

Post-Arab Spring developments in the Middle East have captured the world's attention and raised concerns about the uncertain political future of the region. Egypt in particular seems to be trapped in an existential struggle over the nature and structure of its political regime between apparently irreconcilable factions with their own visions, interests and resources. These debates have been epitomised in protracted and bitter arguments, often spilling into the country's streets, over the constitution, the nature of the political system, the balance of power between the executive, the parliament and the judiciary and the respective roles of an array of competing factions. These factions are diverse and include established actors with vested interests in the old regime and their emerging challengers. Understanding their positions and current strategies consequently requires a historical contextualisation of their past under the constraints of an authoritarian state.

Pundits still debate the nature of the January 25, 2011 uprising and the subsequent removal of president Mohamed Morsi after June 30 2013. There is nevertheless a wide acknowledgement that an opening of political opportunities at the macro level has occurred in Egypt after 2011. The National Democratic Party of former president Hosni Mubarak, which enjoyed an unshakable hold over political institutions tantamount to a monopoly, was dissolved by court order in April 2011. Shortly afterwards, free, fair and competitive legislative and presidential elections were held. For the first time in Egyptian history, meaningful political change was rendered possible through the ballot box and many political parties consequently emerged in the country. This being said, it would be wrong, according to Lisa Blaydes, to assume that elections in Mubarak's Egypt were meaningless. She argues that, in contrast with other Middle Eastern regimes, Mubarak's Egypt held regular competitive multiparty parliamentary elections despite the authoritarian nature of the regime.

What explains this paradoxical situation? Why would an authoritarian regime organise competitive and multiparty parliamentary elections? And why would people participate, as candidates, as opposition groups and as voters? In this comprehensive study, Blaydes delivers her answers to these compelling and complex questions. She convincingly combines a qualitative and quantitative approach, using field research, interviews and appropriate literature on the one hand and statistical research and surveys on the other. She thoroughly investigates the positions of most relevant actors and demonstrates in the meantime the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This multilevel analysis aims is to understand the rationale behind the organisation of competitive elections and the participation of the population, to investigate the position of opposition groups and the role of other diverse actors, including the liberal elite and foreign countries.

Blaydes's powerful argument draws on the literature on autocracy in Egypt and on the role of elections in autocratic regimes. These two scholarly approaches help her build her main point even if her thesis eventually diverges on several aspects. She notably disapproves

of the two common arguments that elections would be used to counterbalance the military on the one hand and for intra-elite conflict resolution on the other hand. Rather, she insists that elections themselves are used as an institution by the regime. Hence, she demonstrates that elections represent a mechanism of survival for the regime in Egypt for two reasons. Competitive elections ease the distribution of resources from the rent-seeking elite to the citizens and in return they provide essential information on the regime's performance, which is essential for its survival.

The distribution of resources among the rent-seeking elite and its crucial role in the mobilisation of the population is one of Blaydes's most compelling arguments. More importantly, it represents a crucial parameter to understand the role currently played in Egypt by the famous *fulul*, the remnants of the old regime. The *fulul* in this case refers to the political and bureaucratic forces used by the former regime under Mubarak to mobilise popular support through the redistribution of resources. Blaydes demonstrates their role in vote buying in their districts and maintains that in return the *fulul* were granted parliamentary immunity by the regime, a legal measure that had protected them against potential lawsuits. What happened after the 25th January, 2011 revolution then? One could assert that these forces have not disappeared from the political sphere but rather that they are seeking to find a new place under the new political parameters. It is therefore crucial to recontextualise their importance in the past and their use of mobilising networks to understand their current role. This book is inestimably effective in this regard.

The main problem with this book is its sparse consideration of the military, which represents a central actor both before and after the revolution. Blaydes merely refers to military institutions in her introduction, using current political analyses on Egypt to argue that the elections are consistent with military objectives, without examining this issue further.

Blaydes's book is, without a doubt, a powerful contribution to the understanding of Egypt before and after the January 2011 revolution. It is a remarkable analysis of the use of electoral competition by autocratic regime. More specifically, it presents a convincing investigation of the role of electoral processes, resources redistribution and elite competition under Mubarak's regime. Methodologically, it illustrates with expertise the benefits of a multi method approach to social sciences and to the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Blaydes's focus on autocracy and its survival remains relevant after the dismissal of Hosni Mubarak. This book provides a much-needed contextualisation that is required to understand the future of electoral competition and democracy in Egypt. On account of this, it is an insightful read for students of Middle East politics, authoritarianism and electoral systems.