



Publication details, including guidelines for submissions: <https://rowaq.cihrs.org/submissions/?lang=en>

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Academic citation of this article: D'Hondt, Cedric (2021) 'Book Review: The Roots of Revolt by Angela Joya', *Rowaq Arabi* 26 (1), pp. 13-16.

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Book Review: *The Roots of Revolt* by Angela Joya

Cedric D'Hondt

Keywords: Revolution; Political Economy; Egypt; Sadat; Mubarak

The popular demands 'bread, freedom and social justice', which resonated across the Egyptian streets in 2011, illustrate how dire economic conditions contributed to the downfall of then president Hosni Mubarak. Indeed, academic literature soon pointed out how youth unemployment and wealth inequality had fuelled the 2011 revolution.¹ In *The Roots of Revolt*, Angela Joya moves beyond this literature by exploring the underlying causes of Egypt's faltering economy on the eve of the Arab Spring. The author, an assistant professor at the University of Oregon, convincingly argues that Egypt's persisting economic predicaments find their origins in the neoliberal policies of the preceding decades.

Joya coherently constructs her argument across seven chapters, in which she outlines an economic history of Egypt starting from the country's formal independence in 1922 to the ouster of Mubarak in 2011. In these chapters, sound analyses based on theories of political economy and statistics are aptly interwoven with and supported by anecdotal evidence garnered during fieldwork in thirteen out of Egypt's twenty-seven governorates between 2005 and 2008. Since conducting widespread surveys remains difficult in Egypt, the sources of *The Roots of Revolt* are one of the features that make the book stand out.

As the author explains, the stage for a breakthrough of a neoliberal capitalist class was already set under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who assumed Egypt's presidency following the revolution of 1952. To gain *de facto* independence from the former colonial powers, Nasser created a state-planned economy, introducing reforms that nationalised businesses, redistributed land and strengthened social protection for Egypt's working classes. Nonetheless, Nasser's rule failed to break the power of the landlords, due to the government's inability to implement reforms throughout Egypt. Eventually geopolitical events, particularly the failed union with Syria, the depleting war in Yemen (1962-1967) and the defeat by Israel in 1967, hastened the demise of 'Arab socialism'. This led Anwar Sadat, who became Egypt's president in 1970, to steer away from Nasserism.

Instead, Sadat opted for a process of liberalisation, also known as *infitah* or ‘openness’. Following the initial success of the 1973 October War against Israel, a favourable political climate allowed Sadat to push through economic reforms and align Egypt with the United States and Saudi Arabia. However, the *infitah* mainly benefited the propertied classes who, after having endured the Nasserist revolution, were now able to reclaim their privileges. At the same time, the cost of living rose and Egypt’s lower classes suffered. When the government acted upon the recommendation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and cut subsidies on basic food products in 1977, the notorious Bread Intifada broke out, leading to the deaths of dozens of protesters.

The general discontent with Sadat’s rule played into the hands of Islamists, who assassinated the president in 1981. Given the controversial nature of the *infitah*, it comes as no surprise that Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat as president, initially showed reluctance to press on the liberalising agenda. However, the economic crisis of the 1980s hit Egypt hard, and forced Mubarak to seek a gradual rapprochement with the IMF and the World Bank. These financial institutions urged reforms in accordance with the Washington Consensus of 1989, a doctrine that proposes a set of neoliberal policy recommendations, including privatisation, deregulation and tax reduction, as the solution to the economic malaise of postcolonial development states.

In the first half of the 1990s, the government followed up on the recommendations with Egypt’s Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program, which signalled ‘a break from “business as usual” in Egyptian economic policy.’² Although neoliberal reforms continued, poverty briefly dropped under the premiership of Kamal al-Ganzouri (1996-1999), which gained him the title ‘Minister of the Poor’. Regardless, at the start of the twenty-first century, poverty was on the rise again. New neoliberal reforms, spearheaded by the president’s son Gamal Mubarak, led to the surge of what Joya characterises as ‘accumulation by dispossession’, or a set of processes that led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of the many.³ It is important to note that the reforms did not merely benefit the economic liberals. Joya describes two other factions that managed to adapt themselves to the new economic realities: the military and the Muslim Brotherhood.

First, the Egyptian military’s development into a faction of the capitalist class is explained by the author. Although initially one of Egypt’s strongest institutions under Nasser, the defeat in the Six-Day War drastically reduced the military’s political influence. Sadat consequently reduced the armed forces’ size and budget, whilst involving the military in the *infitah* economy as a coup-proofing strategy. After all, providing financial autonomy to the armed forces allowed Sadat to demilitarise the state whilst avoiding a total estrangement between the government and the army. Under Mubarak, the author contends, the military saw both its economic and political influence grow again, so that by the time of the food crisis in 2007, the military could consolidate its popular support and differentiate itself from the regime. Or as Joya puts it: ‘While the army was baking bread for the poor, the regime’s internal security services were clamping down on protesters and striking workers.’⁴

The Muslim Brotherhood managed to adapt as well, establishing itself as an *aspiring* faction of the capitalist class. Following a failed assassination attempt on president Nasser in 1954, the regime clamped down on the Muslim Brotherhood, forcing many members into exile. Again, it was Sadat's *infitah* policy that opened the door for economic participation by targeting exiled Muslim Brothers in Gulf states to reel in investments. Following the dismantling of the Nasserist state, the Muslim Brotherhood stepped in to fill the void, providing social services to the lower classes that were left in the cold by the neoliberal reforms of Sadat and Mubarak. Evidentially, the latter's downfall in 2011 only widened the power vacuum. However, the Muslim Brotherhood's consequential attempt to further increase its influence interfered with the interests of the military. While post-2011 events fall outside the scope of the book, any reader who is familiar with what happened in 2013 understands the implications of Joya's analysis.

While both the military and the Muslim Brotherhood played a significant role in the events of 2011, neither instigated the demonstrations. Instead, the protests that toppled the regime started at the grass-roots level. In the book's last two chapters, the author explains how neoliberal policies ultimately alienated Egypt's working class and farmers from the regime. Dispossession in the countryside, illustrated by forced evictions and steep rents, resulted in land-related violence and the erosion of rural support for the regime. By the late 2000s, following widespread privatisations and labour market reforms, class conflicts equally intensified in Egypt's industrial cities, where a new generation of workers increasingly went on strike, signalling 'the beginning of the end of the Mubarak regime.'⁵

While *The Roots of Revolt* thus provides a deeper understanding of Egypt's political economy, the book's merits do not end there. Angela Joya compellingly refutes the presumption that lay at the basis of the policy recommendations of international financial institutions, namely that economic liberalisation necessarily leads to democratisation. This holds consequences for the purported thesis of resilient authoritarianism, according to which the ruling class did not properly implement economic reforms, and co-opted the new business class through corruption and cronyism. Instead, Joya makes a convincing case claiming that this analysis oversimplifies the situation, that neoliberal reforms actually strengthened Egypt's ruling class, and that in fact it is neoliberalism itself that thwarted genuine attempts at democratisation.

Published in 2020, Joya's book raises pertinent questions regarding the role of international financial institutions in advancing or obstructing democratisation across the world. It also raises questions concerning the contemporary socioeconomic situation of Egypt. In 2016, the repressive regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi secured a three-year IMF loan, in return for subsidy cuts, a currency devaluation and privatisation. On the one hand, Egypt's unemployment decreased over the past year.⁶ At the same time, almost one in three Egyptians live below the poverty line, and an inequality gap remains. A decade after the fall of Mubarak, the roots of revolt still run deep. Joya's book is a recommendable read for students and professionals with an interest in Egypt's political economy, and for academics who conduct research on the relationship between neoliberalism and democratisation.

About the Author

Cedric D'Hondt is an associate of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. He holds two master's degrees: one in law at KU Leuven, and another in Arab Democracy and Human Rights at the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut.

¹ Fahmy, Hazem (2012) 'An Initial Perspective on "The Winter of Discontent": The Root Causes of the Egyptian Revolution', *Social Research* 79 (2), pp. 349-376, accessed 16 March 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23350069>.

² Joya, Angela (2020) *The Roots of Revolt – A Political Economy of Egypt from Nasser to Mubarak* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p. 76.

³ Harvey, David (2003) *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 145.

⁴ Joya, Angela (2020) *The Roots of Revolt*, p. 135.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 194.

⁶ Accessed on 16 March 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/unemployment-rate>.