
In this meticulously researched volume, Zeinab Abul-Magd analyses the reproduction of the hegemonic power of the Egyptian military, with a particular focus on its business complex. In this clear and generally well-written text Abul-Magd outlines how the power of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has deeply penetrated Egyptian civilian life over the course of six decades. In five chapters, the author analyses how the military established and maintained its power, commencing with the era of Nasser and Sadat. It then swiftly moves on to Mubarak and contemporary times. With untiring empirical scrutiny, as well as through the development of a Foucauldian conceptual framework mostly based on insights from *Society Must be Defended* (Foucault 2003), Abul-Magd shows how in spite of a feeble attempt at de-militarization in Nasser’s final years as well as a brief hiatus following the 2011 uprisings, SCAF’s power seems more established than ever.

The first chapter looks back on the period between the 1950s and 1970s, and analyses the rise of military power under Nasser and Sadat. The chapter argues that socialist policies were implemented without much rigour or conviction and that this gap lies at the roots of what could be described as a bifurcation in the development of the Egyptian economy. In Chapter 2, the strategies of prominent defence minister Abu Ghazala are scrutinised. The strategies of Abu Ghazala, in particular the co-production agreements he concluded with the US, also formed an important foundation for the types of semi-commercial, semi-strategic military business initiatives that were to follow. Mubarak’s response to Abu Ghazala’s way of combining business and defence strongly influenced the further development of the military business complex, which is the theme of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 focuses on the specifics of military involvement in industries such as construction and agricultural supplies, whereas Chapter 5 unpicks the sequencing of events that led to Morsi’s election, his failure to keep a government together, and the take-over of army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Within this, the continuity of the military’s business interests is placed central.
Against this rich historical background, the book’s main focus is on economics as a crucial domain for securing and maintaining power. In Abul-Magd’s own words, the “entrenched economic interests of the military institution provide it with both incentives and resources to uphold political hegemony” (p.238).¹ This conclusion is supported throughout the book by showing how the military as an institution – and indeed individual officers – benefits from unscrutinised access to financial resources within a variety of sectors of the Egyptian economy. As there is no transparency on the military’s budget, large financial flows intended to support industry and economic development go unexamined. Abul-Magd shows that the military’s ability to command such flows has strengthened. One area in which such manipulation is perhaps most blatant and serious is through the amendment of laws on tendering and public bidding. Through recent changes to the law (see for example Decree no. 82 of 2013 and no. 48 of 2014; p.225), the military is able to directly grant contracts to its own subsidiaries, without other organisations being able to take part in the tendering process. Such structural changes facilitate monopolisation of economic sectors, even if economic interventions are often justified by claims of countering such monopolisation.

Land and its appropriation – be it through legal means or by force – is another crucial domain through which the Egyptian military strengthens and extends its economic power. Abul-Magd documents various struggles over expropriated land. In some instances, such appropriation was facilitated by the legal provisos which required military approval for the sale or development of land. In others, instances of expropriation were more shameless and people were simply forced from their land using violence (Mansoura, north of Cairo; Qurasaya Island, south of the city; p.212). The documentation of such cases of land grabbing is highlighted throughout the book and is a valuable contribution that is not only relevant to the study of the Egyptian military, but has wider relevance to discussions of internal landgrabbing.

On the whole, the book is a fresh application of Foucauldian thought that fits within the tradition established by authors such as Timothy Mitchell (2002), Joseph Massad (2001), and others. The choice for a loose Foucauldian framework is briefly explained in the

¹ For more on the economic interests of the military in comparative perspective, see Abul-Magd and Grawert’s (2016) Businessmen in Arms.
Introduction and the reader is reminded of it at the start of each chapter, which begins with an apt quotation from *Society Must be Defended*. The main argument, drawing on Foucault’s notions of discipline, power, and the nature of politics/war, is that the Egyptian military “has turned the whole [of] society into an infinite, long-lasting camp where everyday life is subjected to the officer’s visible or invisible watch, yet with allegations of achieving security or guarding the nation” (p.7). Although this argument is perfectly defensible, it is perhaps not the most analytically productive or interesting, especially as the author also argues that the military’s grasp over the economy is a main – if not the main – source of its power. As a result, the overall Foucauldian take appears slightly disjointed. It is important to note, however, that Abul-Magd never over-promised in this respect, as the book aims to “appl[y] political economy and Foucauldian approaches” (p.5). Nevertheless, while some readers may find this a refreshing approach, preferring theory to serve as an inspiration rather than being pinned down by it, others might wish to see a more extensively articulated theoretical argument.

A particular strength of the book that merits highlighting is a clear focus on the international dimension of the Egyptian military’s power base. This is developed first through a focus on the role of various US administrations in the 1980s, and secondly through a focus on the role of the IMF as well as contracting business partners located in Japan. In this way, the book situates its subject matter within the international political economy by clearly outlining the mechanics of the neoliberal project in Egypt. It is further clear about the violent consequences – at times occurring in a strict physical sense and at times understood more broadly – of such neoliberalisation, especially in terms of foregone alternative economic development opportunities for those outside the military sector.

Satisfyingly, the book does not shun recommendations for what might possibly be done so that the future may look differently. Whilst aware of the practical constraints on such recommendations in the present moment, the author provides a clear vision for why demilitarization of Egyptian society is necessary and how such a process might be initiated. As a result, the book’s overall contribution is very comprehensive. Even though it focuses on the specifics of economic development, the book provides an excellent introduction to contemporary Egyptian political affairs because it expertly draws in wider historical analyses.
Whilst specialists will be familiar with such historical developments, the clear evidence – both in terms of figures and qualitative data – Abul-Magd brings to bear on her chosen subject renders this book a valuable contribution to military studies as well as the fields of geography and politics more widely.

References


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