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Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie

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ing power. Her considerations shed light on the deeper political and ideological trajectory of the country, in view of the latest elections. Beji Caid Essebsi's political establishment, often suspected of alleged ties with the former regime, is today confronted with the same multiplicity of contradictory goals that were traditionally at the core of reformism: to build the State and promote centralisation of power while simultaneously limiting state power and promoting participative democracy; to rationalise the state and discipline society while striving for the horizon of freedom.

Finally, Daniela Melfa and Guido Nicolosi's chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the role of the Internet during Ben Ali's regime and the importance of websites and blogs during the revolution. However, unlike the plethora of works that in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings limit their investigation of the relationship between protests' diffusion and the new media, their chapter goes further by analysing the position of the media in the different moments of the transition process, from regime collapse to instauration. They conclude that if the Internet played a facilitating role in the ousting of Ben Ali, after the revolution the Tunisian blogosphere lost its cohesion in the wake of voices' cacophony and the ensuing difficulty in agreeing on a common agenda.

Another highlight of the book is that, in addition to being empirically rich, it is theoretically provoking. Drawing upon a rich overview of the traditional literature, the authors' contributions problematise the very notion of democracy, test the validity of the existing hypotheses and upgrade theoretical interpretations of regime change in light of the relevant events. Roberto Roccu's chapter challenges traditional modernisation theory by contending that 'if the presence of an autonomous and strong middle class is the agent by which democracy comes about, then the provisions and the predictions of democratization theory fail miserably in the Tunisian and even more in the Egyptian case' (62). Similarly, in her analysis on the EU as an external actor of democracy promotion, Panebianco thoroughly reviews and updates the debate on the interaction between the domestic and international dimensions of democratisation, addressing the potential of the EU to be a facilitator of democratisation after 2011.

The book concludes that the domestic dimension is of crucial importance for regime change and that an actor-centred approach is key to understanding current processes. As Panebianco argues in the last chapter, local actors are ultimately responsible as both *pars destruens* of the former regime and *pars construens* of the new one.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution that sheds light on several aspects relating to the processes of democratic change in the area. With its multidisciplinary research methods and conceptual frameworks, it stimulates new promising lines of research in understanding whether the winds of change are still blowing in the MENA, as well as their intensity.

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Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie, by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 2013, Collection 'Les Afriques', 336 pp., €28 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-8111-0907-3

Rarely does a work, as soon as it is published, immediately become the key reference in its field. Mauritania is a unique Islamic republic, one that was defined at independence in 1960 by the

necessity of nation-building – and the absence of other unifying factors – rather than the political Islam of the late 1970s. Known for the erudition of its scholars – who studied in Chinguetti, a major centre for religious scholarship and pilgrimage in the northern part of the country – Mauritania has nonetheless lain at the periphery of the Arab world. This is no longer the case. As such, Islam in Mauritanian politics has long warranted thorough scholarship. After years of research Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, the leading scholar on political Islam in Mauritania, has produced a landmark work on the subject.

Ould Ahmed Salem contributes greatly to the literature through his narrative of Tawassoul, from its emergence as an Islamist movement in the 1970s to its current standing as a premier opposition party. He has the humility to quote from his early work, in which he asserted that Mauritania did not appear susceptible to the Islamist wave. But he can readily be forgiven. When the Mujahadin in the Path of Allah, Mauritania's first Islamist group, formed in 1975, its membership numbered six. When it attempted to organise its first party congress, only 20 showed up. Twenty years later, the wave of oppression former president Maaouya Ould Taya visited upon the Islamist opposition, which was crudely couched in War on Terrorism rhetoric, was destined to elicit sympathy from a public tiring of the autocrat's reign, even among those with no sympathy for Islamists. The author, however, makes a compelling case that Tawassoul has emerged from a handful of activists to a major political force not only by drawing on residual sympathy, but by out-maneuvering, out-organising, and out-thinking its ageing opponents on the political left and the Arab Nationalist right. The party owes much of its dynamism to its founder, political professional Jemil Ould Mansour. Breaking into religious politics from his Hassane and griot parentage, boasting religious learning, seasoned by stints in prison and in exile, Ould Mansour has outshone his contemporaries. Tawassoul's relatively youthful leadership compares favourably to the gerontocratic character of other parties. And in contrast to the stilted rhetoric of former Marxist and Arab nationalist parties, this new party remains intellectually vibrant, adapting an Islamist matrix to draw in Arab nationalists as well as addressing the concerns of a new generation of Mauritians.

Readers might question Ould Ahmed Salem's uncritical description of Tawassoul's centrist turn in 2004, when the party 'domesticated' its discourse and embraced democracy, equality, and feminism in its platform through a flexible but thoroughly Islamist ideological framework. 'Love is our slogan', one communiqué declared. The party's skilful manoeuvring, namely its alternate support for and opposition to the government of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, plays a key role in the author's portrayal of Jemil Ould Mansour as a masterful tactician, and Tawassoul as a preeminent political force. What emerges is a portrait of two Tawassouls, one enlightened, the other cunning. Though not necessarily mutually contradictory, these portraits deserve to be reconciled. Ultimately, the only unimpeachable test of the party's commitment to its stated principles would be for it to exercise power and then relinquish it, as has Tunisia's Ennahda party. In view of the current political trajectory in the Arab world, however, this eventuality is most unlikely.

Ould Ahmed Salem breaks ground in exploring the role of Islam as a means of social change at the hands of the Haratine, drawing on Saba Mahmood's study of the feminist politics of piety. Though the Soninke and the Halpoulaar ethnicities maintained slavery and a highly stratified caste system, the Haratine constitute, by an order of magnitude, Mauritania's largest former slave class. Long kept deliberately uneducated, isolated through nomadism, bound to their masters and by the Sahara, Haratines' horizons through 1970 remained limited. The end of nomadism as way of life with the droughts of the 1970s and the ensuing rapid urbanisation forged a new Haratine identity, one shaped in part by the exploding number of mosques in Nouak-

chott, most free of government regulation. In a country that has, since 1963, deliberately eschewed ethnic self-identification in national censuses, the Haratine are thought to compose up to half the population. Their demographic strength and grievances render them a growing political power.

Slavery's forms and its justification within certain religious texts continue to blight Mauritania. As the author quotes one major cleric, 'Islam does not forbid the exploitation of Man by Man.' Just as the deliberate deprivation of religious education was used to forge the mental shackles of false consciousness, some Haratine have, in corollary, sought religious education as a tool of emancipation and social mobility. Here the author is at his most compelling, as he lets his subjects speak for themselves and yields to the compelling personal narratives of Haratine imams, who began their religious education as adults and battled government and clerical opposition to win their mosques and congregations. Their experiences shape their politics. One Hartani imam, M'Bareck Ould Mahmoud, drew upon his personal experiences as a slave when he issued a fatwa against slavery. Haratine imams, unswayed by overtures from Tawassoul, have tended to support perennial Hartani candidate Messaoud Ould Boulkheir.

Even more brazen public figures emerge, claiming to wrest Islam back from the hands of slavery's apologists, who are led by an ulema driven by social conservatism rather than Islam. Activist Birane Ould Abeid came to public notoriety – and prison – by publicly burning early Malikite religious texts that he deemed sanctioned slavery. The crisis Ould Abeid ignited not only brought the Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionism to public notice, but catalysed a debate on slavery and the role of Islam. 'Islam is the victim of the ulema more than it is that of Orientalism or islamophobia', the ever-temeritous Ould Abeid claims. The author argues convincingly that the Islamic renaissance has led to a renaissance of activism, where Islam serves as the foundation for social change and the corpus behind arguments against slavery and other retrograde practices.

Thus, in an expanding Islamic sphere Muslims can express and reimagine Islam outside the realm of official Islam sanctioned by the State. Recordings by preachers, beginning with those of Egypt's Abdel Hamid Kishk, come to shape popular religious thought more than theological treatises. The growth of the Islamic sphere does not necessarily translate into support for political Islam. Islam for the younger generation of Mauritians is not an unchanging reference or a doxa, in Ould Ahmed Salem's analysis, but rather an episteme, a justified and proven belief that can adapt and change. As such, Islam can be harnessed for social progress, much as the growing place of Islam in the public discourse is itself the fruit of social change.

Unfortunately, the author, in his analysis of the role of religion, seldom plays devil's advocate. One cannot argue for Islam in politics as a force for social progress without solidly addressing opposing perceptions that it empowers society's most retrograde elements. Moreover, Ould Ahmed Salem gives limited attention to increasing religiosity among younger Mauritians and the ensuing generational divide. In a work centred on the evolving relationship between Muslims and Islam there is little mention of perceptions, mores or the role of new technologies among the critical younger generation. He focuses considerable attention on Salafism in its terrorist and non-violent forms. Yet one wishes that his focus on social change also included an examination of the silent majority of Islamists whose social influence is felt not in political engagement but in the myriad forms of expression that also shape society. Nonetheless, he excels in his coverage of the Salafist movement, from the sociological backgrounds of Salafists to elucidating their theology and illuminating Nouakchott's attempts to combat terrorism in its theological facet. The use of committees of imams, drawn broadly from both government supporters and Salafists, to persuade rather than to punish, contrasts sharply with prevailing approaches

and which holds promise, despite some inmates' recidivism. While Saudi Arabia preceded Mauritania in its emphasis on de-radicalising prisoners, Nouakchott's approach merits consideration. It remains more topical than ever as of this writing in 2015.

Ould Ahmed Salem's higher education at Sciences Po-Paris is conveyed not only through his erudition but unfortunately also in his prose. The author takes great pains to enliven his descriptions with brief portraits of key figures, most notably Jemil Ould Mansour, as well as imams' personal narratives. The occasional density of his writing is, however, all the more challenging when he moves to exploring such esoteric matters as Shariah family law through a lengthy treatise that makes use of case law. Here only the astounding deeds behind these precedents lighten the text. Notwithstanding such minor issues, there is no doubt that this work will serve as a core reference for years to come. The author concludes that Islam is not immutable, fixed, or atavistic. He has nonetheless captured the essence of Islam in Mauritanian politics in this generation.

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A history of modern Morocco, by Susan Gilson Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 306 pp., \$29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-521-00899-0

Susan Gilson Miller's new text, *A History of Modern Morocco*, is a concise introduction to Morocco's political history. As the first of its kind since C. R. Pennell's 2000 volume, Miller's work builds on new sources and research to provide a deeper look at Hassan II's legacy, as well as engage with new historiographical questions about the impact of the protectorate years, the role of 'society' in shaping political history, and the mythical unity of nationalist movement. Miller relies mostly French and English secondary literature, but also complements it with Arabic sources, all well documented in 50 pages of endnotes and citations. Her narrative is supplemented by appendices to orient new students of Morocco, including a chronology, maps, a glossary of Arabic terms, a 'who's who' list of recurring names, chronologies the 'Alawite monarchs and French Residents-General, and photographs and illustrations. For English-language readers engaging with contemporary Moroccan politics for the first time, Miller's book should be considered the best single work available for understanding the continuities between Morocco's present and recent past.

Miller's approach to writing history is a material one. Though ideologies and traditions are important, Morocco's political history can best be explained through the 'tactics and accommodation of interests' that political actors employ, using the assets available to them, to address the threats or opportunities of the moment (214–215). Deciding who these actors are, and when they become important for Morocco, thus becomes the central task of the 'synthetic' process of writing political history (215).

Perhaps most important among these decisions is when to begin the history of modern Morocco. Miller begins her narrative with the French invasion of Algeria, a starting point which has been problematised in North African historiography because it associates the beginning of 'modernity' with European action. Miller's opening chapters proceed with an awareness of this historiographical danger. She situates the decisions of Sultan 'Abd al-Rahman and the Makhzen