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Author(s): Ahmed Meiloud

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Political Islam, Justice and Governance

Mbaye Lo

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, XI, 386 pp., 74,99 € (Hardcover)

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REVIEWED BY AHMED MEILOUD

Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Studies, American University of Kuwait

Mbaye Lo's *Political Islam, Justice and Governance* is unique in its attempt to supply an explanation based on the comportment of the Islamists in power. This practical aspect distinguishes Lo's oeuvre from other discussions on the field. Structurally, the book consists of nine chapters divided thematically into three sections. Within this context, the first four chapters outline the premises of Lo's argument (i.e. the Islamist project is based on a militant notion of justice; the neoliberal state relegates justice to a question of marginal importance; Islamist justice agenda finds justification in recurrent Qur'anic invocations and traditional juristic elaborations; therefore, all Islamists are similar in their commitment to this agenda). The next four chapters involve his case studies (namely, the Egyptian revolution, ISIS, the Islamists' reign in Sudan, and Morsi's brief tenure in Egypt) used to prove these premises. Finally, the last section serves as the concluding remark.

The author posits a diametric opposition between the Islamist project and the current liberal order. Rather than stressing the place of God in Islamic ethos of Governance (*rabbāniyya*) and the place of the "state" in the nation-state paradigm, Lo points to an antagonism between an Islamist vision centered on a militant notion of justice and a liberal vision based on extolling individual freedom. Although the author differentiates at the onset between "militant" Islam (whose violence supplies a convenient prelude to illustrate their existential antagonism to the liberal order) and "political Islam", he maintains that the aggressive drive for justice is archetypal of all Islamic political endeavors. According to Lo, "there is an apparent shared value of justice" (17). The centrality of this value has shaped "the worldview of political Islam across time," despite all "local peculiarities, ideological historicity, and political complexities within each entity" (18).

Lo further suggests that this view of justice is both political and polemical (189), not just because of the 'reckless and irrationally ecstatic' nature of radical Islamists, such as ISIS, but because of its conception—by all Islamists—as the sole indispensable foundational value. More importantly, the Islamists tend to express justice in terms of "conformity, conservatism, obedience, and respect of political and religious authorities" (45). It is precisely in this respect that it directly clashes with the individual freedom platform. To explain this view, Lo invokes Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that "one finds in the human heart depraved taste for equality, which impels the weak to want to bring the strong down to their level, which reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom" (10).

In the face of this Islamist uncompromising quest for justice, one meets an equally radical freedom agenda where freedom transcends all other values. This has “resulted in the subjugation of human rights to economic freedom” (30). Lo attributes this to the proclivity of Western liberal thinkers (from Kant to Rawls) to define the “good life” in measure of the freedom granted to the individual in her pursuit of happiness. This tended to produce a lingering image of justice as the antithesis to market fairness and freedom of trade. Lo thus argues that since freedom, not justice, is the default setting of the modern world order, the Islamists’ failure and estrangement in the modern world order is inevitable.

In these regards, the book is a significant addition to the literature on Islamism, as it raises some fundamental questions about the struggle pitting Western governments and their local allies against the forces of political Islam. It is also important because of its content. For example, Chapter 6 (“The Islamic State: The Rise of Vigilante Justice”) comprises a rich exposition of IS literature on concepts of justice, vengeance and submission. This includes long translations of critical texts of IS propaganda. Rendering these Arabic songs, poems, speeches into idiomatic English is invaluable service to students of radical Islam. Lo’s analysis of these texts is of equally important value because of his expertise in Islamic law and history. Moreover, his survey of Arabic press and his interviews of influential Arab intellectuals in Egypt and Sudan offer valid and valuable perspectives on the tactics of the Muslim Brothers in these two environments (Chapters 5-8). More importantly, Lo attempted to draw his conclusions from a real engagement with contemporary Islamist experiments.

Yet, the book has evident shortcomings. Lo’s attempt to equate the position of all Islamists from the question of freedom is at best ill-informed. For instance, his claim that Islamist discourses on *maqāṣid* (the overarching aims of Islam) show no interest in freedom overlooks its frequent invocation in the literature. Islamist scholars, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Ahmad al-Raysuni, and Sa’d al-Din al-‘Uthmani, Jasir ‘Awda, and Jamil Mansur, to name but a prominent few, have all built on the seminal work of Tahir Ibn ‘Ashur (published in 1978) to promote freedom, not just as an essential Islamic value but as the default of human life as God ordained it. It is not clear, in Lo’s account, why should one discount the Islamists’ liberal discourse in favor of their discourse on justice.

Moreover, Lo tends to interpret events in the region in terms of an imagined conflict between the Muslim Brothers, who seek to stifle individual freedom and “others” who are champion of it, when other more compelling interpretations are available. His account of the saga of Mahmoud Muhammad Taha is a case in point. As any keen observer of Sudanic affairs would attest, the tragic fate of Taha had little to do with the Islamists’ drive for justice or with Taha’s principled stance for freedom. It was rather a radical outcome of a political rivalry (Turabi and his Islamists vs. Mahmoud Taha and his Republicans) to win and leverage the support of the authoritarian rule of Ja’far al-Numayri. Taha’s fate was sealed when President Numayri, whom he had initially supported, decided to ride the rising tide of *Sahwa*. Turabi and his cohorts played an auxiliary, if any, role.

Additionally, Lo is quite uncritical when using the Egyptian press to support his central thesis. He, to illustrate, shows little circumspection when quoting Cairene news outlets such as Al-Masry Al-Youm, one of many platforms which concocted and circulated stories against Morsi’s regime. Moreover, Lo is either not privy to, or readily dismisses, the wealth of information that became available after the July Coup of 2013, which suggests that the

Egyptian army had carefully planned and orchestrated the mass protest that preceded it. Finally, the book contains editorial errors, several mistranslations and a few puzzling statements, which should have been eliminated in the editorial process. For instance, the name of the Egyptian political activist Bilal Fadl appears as Bilal Philip (190). Lo also mistranslates *Jumu‘at al-zahf* (Friday of the crawling march) as “Friday of Surplus” (137). Furthermore, he declares that *fulul* means a loser in classical Arabic (187). In fact, the term means remnants of a defeated army. In the Egyptian popular culture, the term refers to the remnants of the Mubarak regime. Because the term has a pejorative connotation, it could not have been coined by the 2012 Presidential Election candidate Ahmed Shafiq to refer to himself, as Lo asserts.

Lastly, Lo states that “There is much disdain for US support of the state of Israel because of its ongoing involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria” (41). This sentence is baffling because the resentment to the US support for the state of Israel has to do with the latter’s treatment of the Palestinians. The sentiment predates America’s recent involvement in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Despite these shortcomings, Lo’s *Political Islam, Justice and Governance* appeals to a wide range of audiences. Students of political Islam, historians of the contemporary Middle East, policymakers and even laymen with avid interests in the MENA region will all find it accessible, rich in details and provocative in its conclusions.