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Book Review – ‘Businessmen: Democracy and Human Rights’ by Mohamed Sayed Said

Messaoud Romdhani

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As civil activists, party members, or individuals interested in public affairs, when we consider democratic alternatives to the tyranny experienced throughout the Arab region, we usually evoke social and political groups that share our ‘dream’ or perception of valid alternatives. In that moment, our preconceived ideological notions and rash judgements (based neither on field studies nor scientific analysis) often emerge, leading to an unfair censuring of social groups that could have a significant role in achieving the desired change.

The importance of the book ‘Businessmen: Democracy and Human Rights’¹ by Mohamed Sayed Said² lies in its innovative reconsideration of social reality removed from assumptions and conventional ideas. It offers a field study of businessmen’s perspectives on reality in Egypt, based on a survey that attempts optimal scientific adherence. Said aims to demonstrate the necessity of revising our ideas and perceptions about businessmen or, as we ideologically perceive them, ‘the bourgeoisie.’ His analysis asserts that members of the so-called bourgeoisie are not all aligned with political power, nor are they necessarily opposed to democracy and human rights. Like other social groups, they often suffer from the repercussions and injustices of political authoritarianism. Moreover, they can potentially provide support for reformist and human rights projects in Egypt or any country experiencing political tyranny and social injustice.

The book, classified within social research, consists of four interconnected chapters. The first chapter engages with sociopolitical theories, especially nationalism and Marxism. These theories approach businessmen as a cohesive capitalist class with unified interests and political vision; and assumes a special relationship with the state and its bureaucratic and financial circles. The second chapter discusses the author’s adopted survey, detailing its formulation, accuracy, and credibility, and the diverse responses of businessmen. The third chapter interprets these responses, accounting for different considerations including size of ownership, nature of managed project, age, education, and experience. The fourth chapter contextualises the responses of businessmen within public social relations, considering their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the political, social, and economic trajectory of the country.

Serving as an entry point for the objective examination of the relationship between businessmen – or the bourgeoisie – and state, power, and democracy, the author begins with the following methodological question: Should our ideological perspective be the starting point when interpreting reality, or should we start from reality itself and delve into its meanings to extract conclusions that qualify us to approach it objectively, without preconceived ideas?

The author believes that research should be liberated from the grip of ideology and the shackles of political conflicts to achieve a precise understanding of reality. Many researchers, especially leftists, attempt to project ideology onto society, leading to results that align with their thinking; not objective interpretations, but incorrect conclusions. For instance, capitalism did not evolve in the way Marxism predicted, nor did it experience the ‘inevitable’ collapse foreseen by Marxists. In Western Europe and North America, capitalism managed to overcome its multiple crises, adapt, flourish, and establish mechanisms for social security, relatively enhancing prosperity for various social classes (including the unemployed).³

Meanwhile in Arab societies there have been middle-class led ‘military and political revolutions’ that have resulted in the domination of state bureaucracy and security and military forces. Repression and authoritarianism have prevailed, with a obdurate radical mindset distrustful of the bourgeoisie. However, if we set aside nationalist and Marxist ideologies and focus on the circumstances of businessmen, we can observe that they are not fundamentally different from other social groups in terms of political vision. They ‘exist on the same cultural ground as other societal strata,’ and are part of general cultural momentum with its diversity and fragmentation.

This leads us to the nature of the state; it can either be a democratic state that transcends private interests, operates independently from all classes, and involves all social parties. Alternatively, it can be privatised and biased towards the interests of specific groups. In the latter case, it becomes authoritarian and corrupt, distorting capitalist development and hindering any tendency towards ‘democratisation.’

The error in evaluating businesspersons and their relationship with the state, democracy, and human rights lies not only in the imposition of ideological judgments on a complex and changing reality, but also in the prevalence of impressionistic judgments that do not rely on objective readings. Superficial opinions or biased media narratives—such as those which posit the the Egyptian public is imbued with a pharaonic culture that seeks salvation at the hands of a ‘just dictator’ without considering freedoms or basic rights—inevitably lead to conclusions that serve the existing dictatorship. The truth is that the only way out of these emotionally-framed positions is through field-based scientific research that surveys the opinions of every social group and draws conclusions through the interrogation of reality. Since Egyptian businessmen are the absent audience in communication with human rights organisations and are the most exposed sector to prejudiced judgments whether ideological or impressionistic, surveying their opinions on the state, governance, human rights, and democracy is essential.

The author adopted the survey-based approach, with questions directed towards a sample of businessmen covering various issues, including: evaluating the democratic situation in Egypt through the presence—or absence—of the rule of law, the effectiveness of parliament, the integrity

of elections, the possibility of power sharing, and opportunities for political participation. Additionally, questions addressed human rights, respect and protection of civil and political rights, the country's need for human rights organisations, the sample's awareness of these organisations, and their willingness to actively participate in human rights work. Responses confirmed that the majority of businessmen:

- oppose the existence of a strong government that sacrifices democracy for the sake of economic development
- believe that their interests align with the presence of the rule of law and institutions, and that they adhere to the democratic option
- acknowledge the existence of numerous human rights violations, as indicated by international human rights organisations, and support efforts aimed at ending them.

What can also be inferred is the difficulty in crystallising the Egyptian business sector as a cohesive class holding unified perceptions regarding public issues. If we consider free competition as the fundamental virtue of capitalism, without which there is no capitalist system capable of development, and if we acknowledge that large corporations and influential businesspersons, who represent a minority, are the only ones who have a disproportionate ability to influence political decisions and build client networks with the authorities and obtain significant banking facilitation) while owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, who represent the vast majority, do not receive the same attention or privileges and thus are unable to compete, then we realise the extent of stagnation afflicting the internal development of the business sector and the injustice felt by owners of small and medium-sized companies.

Therefore, it is not possible to speak of a homogeneous class consciousness among Egyptian businesspersons, which would make them a significant force exercising influence over state and society. Like other social classes, they have lost their influence in political and civil life, just like the middle class, which has lost much of its power due to the weakness of the labour movement and the disappearance of the role of unions. Even intellectuals, who have played a prominent role creatively and in the media, remain outside the dynamics of public life; civil society remains fragile and weak, lacking mechanisms and institutions that engage with businesspersons and contribute to providing them with civic culture. In contrast, the alliance between the state apparatus and influential businesspersons who control the market has grown and intensified amidst the marginalisation of all these social forces.

The fundamental problem remains with the state apparatus, which imposes its control over most economic and social life, favours stagnation, and is disinclined towards undertaking any deep democratic reforms that could contribute to national advancement and unleash societal potentials. These potentials include the crystallisation of a bourgeoisie class with a regulated role, robust political parties, an active civil society, and an influential labour movement. Nevertheless in a society absent such reforms, the democratic awareness of the survey's targeted demographic largely favours the rule of law and peaceful transition of power and desires substantial reforms. This was based more on personal preferences and perhaps innate inclinations rather than a result

of careful monitoring of public affairs. Furthermore, it is evident that the surveyed Egyptian businessmen prefer to distance themselves from political life and do not wish to make tangible contributions to it, nor do they want to participate in efforts to liberate the country from its multiple crises.

This survey reveals a need to build a democratic bloc within society; one comprised of all social classes who have an interest in democratic transition. The role of businesspersons should not be ignored because they have the capability and interest, if conditions allow, to play a significant role in the political reform process. The author sees his survey has as a precursor the further conducting of surveys targeting other social sectors, despite the obstacles in Egypt surrounding such direct scientific practice. One of the most significant obstacles is the legacy of authoritarianism, which has greatly influenced public opinion. Additionally, there are proponents of totalitarian ideologies who fear that such surveys may expose the weaknesses of their ideas and narratives and prefer for public opinion to remain stagnant and fragmented.

The book attempted to address the issues of overcoming the arrogance of ideology and its domination over thinking and analysis, and conducting fieldwork with courage and objectivity. Finally, it unveils an important segment of society that was considered homogeneous, known only for its love for wealth and power, only to discover that they share our concerns and dreams of a free and democratic society.

Although one may question the relevance of a book published twenty-three years ago, given the many upheavals and developments witnessed by Egypt and the entire Arab region since then, I nevertheless believe that 'Businessmen: Democracy and Human Rights' warrants reading and rereading, especially in light of the setbacks and disappointments experienced since the Arab Uprisings. Mohamed Sayed Said first calls for a commitment to the project of change and an adaptation of the democratic vision to reality, 'which entails a double review, part of which involves re-evaluating the dream itself, and the other part involves re-analysing reality itself.'⁴ Secondly, he calls on civil and political society actors and all proponents of political reform to 'develop various means of communication with an audience that is marginalised and silenced as a precondition for reproducing existing social and political systems.'⁵ This silencing is not something to which we should aspire.

About the Author

Messaoud Romdhani is a former member of the Executive Committee of the EuroMed Rights Network, and the former president of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights.

This article is originally written in Arabic for Rowaq Arabi.

¹ Publisher: (2001) Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies.

² Egyptian political science researcher and human rights activist. Said served as a research advisor and co-founder of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, as well as the founding editor-in-chief of Rowaq Arabi, prior to his death in 2009.

³ Said, Mohamed Sayed (2001) *Businessmen: Democracy and Human Rights* (Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies), p.20.

⁴ Ghalyoun, Burhan (2009) 'A Tribute to Mohamed Sayed Said on His Fortieth Anniversary,' 21 October, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://rb.gy/zisd8v>.

⁵ Ibid.