Book Review:


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Only a small minority of Syria’s Sunnite ulama have distanced themselves publicly from the regime since the outbreak of the uprising. The large majority has adopted a quietist posture towards the regime’s ongoing campaign of repression. This overwhelmingly compliant stance of the religious establishment results certainly from direct threats and coercive measures by the regime. However, the reasons for this positioning of the Ba’thist regime’s traditional foes emanate from longer-term sociopolitical processes that Thomas Pierret’s remarkably riveting study of Syria’s religious field reveals.

Throughout the book’s five chapters, Pierret convincingly unrolls his central argument; namely, that the ulama have been able to adapt to challenges emanating from social change and the authoritarian context due their resource of tradition. By applying Bourdieu’s sociological concept of the field, Pierret forcefully analyses the complex interactions between the political, economic and religious realms since the 1930s. He analyzes how the ulama as ‘custodians of commodities of salvation’ have been able to hold on to their relative autonomy by demonstrating a considerable of pertinence and flexibility in ever-changing political contexts, even under authoritarian rule of the Ba’thist regime. Despite its almost hegemonic position in the political field throughout the years of the Assads’ rule, the regime has been unable to intervene in the religious field to nearby similar degree.

Pierret’s study contributes substantially to the debates on authoritarian politics and on religious authorities in contemporary Muslim societies. It refutes two common claims about Syrian politics and the Assad regime’s mechanisms of rule. It has widely been argued that the secular and Alawite-dominated regime lacks any substantive legitimacy among Syrian Sunnis. Pierret, however, reveals that the regime has been remarkably successful in the establishment of an ambiguous, but nevertheless robust relationship with the urban-based Sunni clerics, social actors that possess considerable credibility of many pious Syrian Muslims. He considers this ‘clergy-regime-partnership’ being embedded in the encompassing transformation of the regime’s social base in its post-populist phase, from its former rural-based, popular constituencies toward urban-based, socioeconomic elites, a dynamic that became all too obvious throughout the ongoing uprising.

The second, often-made assertion that the recent incremental reconstitution of the clergy’s social authority emanates from a deliberate policy by the Ba’thist regime to encourage a quietist and moderate form of Islam, is denoted by Pierret as an overestimation in the regime’s capacity as a ‘social engineer’. By retracing longer-term historical developments that led to the ulama’s considerable social following, he convincingly argues that the increased religious popular fervor and the concomitant influence of the Sunni clergy stems only marginally from the regime’s intervention into the religious field. Instead, the regime has accommodated this social process and striven to confine its political impacts by applying alternating, at times erratic strategies towards the Muslim clergy.

Yet, the ulama have not only successfully confronted those challenges emanating from the authoritarian political realm. Pierret exposes their considerable adaptive skills in countering challenges arising from structural social transformations that have irrevocably worked towards the diminishment of their social power and have threatened their authority as guardians of religious tradition. The groundwork for this achievement has been laid in the ‘era of the founders’ (1920-1979), as Pierret describes at length in the first chapter. Since independence, the state has only marginally institutionalized the religious field. Also the Ba'heit power refrained from including the religious elite into the state’s apparatus, which allowed them to preserve a status of relative autonomy. By
adapting innovative modes of social action in order to assert their position in a modernizing society, in particular through the establishment of institutes of religious formation (‘turning mosques into universities’) in which new methods of instruction were introduced while master-disciple relations that had characterized former religious instruction could simultaneously be preserved, the mashaykha succeeded in affirming their religious authority. By drawing on an extensive volume of Arab sources, the chapter shows how the ulama were not only well positioned to hegemonize the processes of transmission of religious knowledge and formation of future religious men, but continue to exercise a considerable influence over processes of identification within the society. The author identifies as primary cause for clergy’s continuous social and religious authority their success to promote a particular conception of the transmission of religious knowledge; threats emanating from social transformation could be turned into opportunities.

The years of the armed Islamic uprising (1979-1982) constituted a watershed in the relations between mashaykha and regime as redrawn in the study’s structure. But even in the ‘iron years’ following the uprising, the regime held on to its strategy of excluding the religious elite from the state’s apparatus. This policy is characterized in the second chapter as a two-fold ‘strategy of a weak state’. While its first component comprised of drastic repressive measures, the policy’s second pillar aimed at weakening the state’s religious institutions in order to enlarge its ability to control. As religious practice within society could not openly be discouraged, the regime could not afford to ignore it either, in particular with regards to the growing popular demand for religious education. In order not to leave the ground to elusive private networks, the regime relied on ‘sub-contractors’ that had demonstrated their loyalty to the regime throughout the years of the uprising. It authorized those clerics to establish institutes of superior religious formation and offered some of them the opportunity to ascertain central positions in the religious field, with the objective to achieve margins of religious legitimacy.

Challenges to the ulama’s authority did not only emanate from politics and social change, but also from doctrinal conflicts with Salafist and reformist clerics. By providing a comprehensive overview over the religious field’s landscape, the third chapter elucidates how the traditionalist Sunnite clergy, assisted by the regime, successfully dealt with those challenges arising from those doctrinal confrontations. Pierret argues against the often-made claim that the regime’s interventions in favor of traditionalists and Sufis were determined by those currents’ doctrinal orientations and their hierarchical-pyramidal structures that facilitate controlling their followers. He exposes that the state’s policy of religion was rather determined by the fact that traditionalist clerics occupy the dominant positions in the religious field since the end of the Ottoman Empire and constitute the large majority in the doctrinal landscape. The regime’s support for the majority camp seems to follow the logic that it counted on a maximization of support that these clerics were able to provide to the regime.

The traditionalist clergy’s hegemonic position within the religious field has not solely been based on the regime’s interventions, but rather by their access to considerable economic resources. The fourth chapter analyses the political economy underpinning the clergy’s continuous social power. The existence of a ‘clerical-mercantile complex’, designated as an alliance between the urban based ulama and the private sector, allowed an ever-growing enlargement of different forms of religious social action. The alliance not only assured the clerics’ financial autonomy from the state, but enabled them to benefit directly from the economy’s liberalization. The state’s scarce resources deprived it from upholding its welfare policies vis-à-vis a growing, impoverished population. In order to prevent potential destabilizing effects emanating from pauperization of large section of the society, the state liberalized its policy towards the welfare and enabled religious networks, in particular the Damascus-based Zayd movement, to establish a wide-ranging web of charities. Pierret argues that the alliance between middle-size entrepreneurs and merchants and the ulama is nurtured by mutual interests over which the state exercises only limited control. The ulama provide the private sector with social capital, trust and networks, while merchants and entrepreneurs provide financial donations, management expertise and relations to the security apparatus. In addition, both actors emerge from the same social merchant and commercial milieus and share often common familial origin. Through a thorough analysis of the parliamentary elections campaign in 2007, Pierret reveals that the religious
men have moved even closer to the politico-military elite, resulting in an ongoing transformation of the clerical-mercantile complex. Financial donations by crony capitalists to the religious foundations during the electoral campaign appear to be too tempting to be refused by the clergy.

The study’s final chapter examines the ulama’s political interventions and practice in alternating political contexts since the Mandate period and juxtaposes it to those of political Islamists, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood. Their approach to politics radically differs; while the Brotherhood forms an oppositional political actor who works towards a transformation of the political structures, the ulama concentrate their efforts on the defense of their sectoral interests. Their political behavior corresponds to a sectoral logic of political action, characterized by efforts to influence particular modalities in the exercise of state power. Contrary to political Islamists, they do not seek power for themselves. Despite the profound heterogeneity of the political contexts since the 1930s, Pierret succeeds in drawing a number of general conclusions on the ulama’s modes of political action. First and foremost, the ulama are by definition representatives of a sectoral elite and their political engagement is always a secondary dimension of their social practice. Their political practice is characterized by strategic rigidity and tactical flexibility and their invention into politics are of an inconstant manner, mainly in the form of punctual eruptions and lobbying. This political behavior allows the ulama, despite their total disagreement with the regime’s ideological choices, to adapt to an authoritarian environment as their political demands are primarily limited to negotiate the preservation and/or enlargement of those spaces to carry out their vocation. This sectoral logic of political action has facilitated in sum the ulama’s rapprochement to the regime in its post-Ba’thist stage.

The book, based on the author’s doctoral dissertation, fills significant gaps in the literature on Syria’s religious field and its Sunni clergy, a field of study has been dominated by a focus on the grand figures of “official”, i.e. state-sanctioned Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood while ignoring significant portions of the country’s religious elite. Pierret, however, examines the complex modes of structuration of the field and offers a complex portrait of the country’s religious elite by revealing its social roots, social practices as well as doctrinal controversies. The strength of this invaluable study does not solely lie in the revelation of multitudinous factual dynamics within the religious realm as well its interaction with politics and economics realm that has been never been studied before in such a comprehensive manner. It disproves the idea of the Syrian regime as omnipotent, not being able to ensure the loyalty of social elites, in particular the Sunnite and conservatives, other than through coercive measures. Since the outbreak of the ongoing uprising, understanding those dynamics seems of even higher importance. Without minimizing the importance of repression in this particular authoritarian setting, Pierret’s analysis underlines the importance of social ‘collusive transactions’ of politico-military, economic and religious elites, those robust ties that have ensure the regime’s ‘horizontal legitimacy’, even throughout uprising.

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