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## Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism

Ramazan Kılınç

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# Review

## ***Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism***

John Calvert. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 256 pp.

Ramazan Kılınç<sup>\*</sup>

In August 2013, the Egyptian military, which deposed the elected president Mohammed Mursi a month earlier, harshly cracked down on the protestors. The protestors, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, aimed to restore the Mursi government through their sit-ins. The military crackdown left hundreds, if not thousands, died and several thousand arrests behind. While scholars are trying to account for what is happening in Egypt and states are searching for relevant policies to respond to these developments, only a few books can offer as nuanced insights as John Calvert's *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* offers. Based on diligent research, Calvert writes on the life and thinking of one of the most influential Islamist thinkers, Sayyid Qutb, with a special attention to the social, cultural, economic and political context within which Qutb lived. Throughout the book, Calvert sophisticatedly shows the interaction between the formation of Qutb's thoughts and the Egyptian socio-political context. This academically rigorous but still

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\* **Ramazan Kılınç** is assistant professor of political science and Director of Islamic Studies Program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He received his Ph.D. (2008) from Arizona State University and M.A. (2001) and B.A. (1999) from Bilkent University, Turkey. He previously taught in James Madison College at Michigan State University. Among other publications, the author's recent works are forthcoming in *Comparative Politics* and *Political Science Quarterly*. He is the recipient of the 2012 Weber Paper Award and a co-recipient of the 2013 Sage Paper Award of the American Political Science Association. He is now working on a book manuscript tentatively titled as *Alien Citizens: Christians in Turkey and Muslims in France*.

accessible study shows the transformation of a literary critic to a romantic nationalist, to a mainstream Islamist, and to a religious revolutionary as social, cultural and political turbulences unfolded in Egypt over the years.

Calvert presents a lively prose in analyzing the development of Qutb's political ideas throughout the years. In his youth period, Qutb, a villager, established himself as a literary author and critic thanks to a few networks that he built during his college years. In these early years, Qutb earned his life from being a teacher and, later, an inspector in education ministry. Qutb's earlier political stance, secular nationalism, was mostly shaped by British colonial dominance in Egypt. In late 1940s, Qutb lost faith in secular nationalism after he observed the failures and corruption of nationalist politicians. Then, Qutb turned to Islam as a recipe for the social and political malaise of his time and wrote a treatise, "Social Justice in Islam," in which he offered Islamic ethics and morality as a solution to the pressing problems of Egypt. To Calvert, Qutb's two-year visit to the U.S. in the late 1940s confirmed his Islamist turn as he became very critical of the American way of life and championed Islamic ethics and morality. Due to his critique of the monarchy for its collaboration with Britain, Qutb supported Free Officers Movement in 1952 revolution that replaced monarchy with a popular authoritarian regime. As Free Officers increased their repression in Egypt and took a strong stance against the Muslim Brotherhood, which also supported the revolution, Qutb felt to choose a side and joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953.

The events unfolded after 1954 are critical to understanding the radicalization of Qutb's political ideology. In 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood to eliminate any alternative to his consolidating power. As many members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb was put in prison. Until his execution in 1964, Qutb spent almost a decade in Tura prison where he both observed and experienced firsthand the torture of the military regime. Calvert shows how this experience transformed Qutb's religio-political thinking and made him a revolutionary thinker. Qutb developed a fundamentalist revolutionary ideology in his prison writings. In his famous commentary on the Quran, Qutb blended revolutionary activism with religious zeal. Calvert writes that this radical turn inspired many radical Islamists in the later years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood denounced Qutb's radicalism and delegitimized violence. However, some fringe groups went even further and developed a political theology that made emergence of an organization such as al-Qaeda legitimate.

*Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* deserves a strong commendation at least for three reasons. First, the study is based on painstaking research into the Arabic sources. Calvert did extensive archival research in Egypt and elsewhere on Qutb's life and writings. Furthermore, he elegantly puts Qutb into a lively historical context that reflects the author's impressive grasp of modern history and culture.

Second, Calvert uses a two-pronged strategy in his highly contextualized study that makes the book both a unique work on Qutb's life and a guide to understand contemporary Islamist politics. On the one hand, Calvert shows how Qutb's religious imagination, ethical and moral concerns, cultural tastes and distastes influenced the formation of his political ideas and activism. He offers a thinker in his entirety and gives details of his character, cultural and religious background. On the other hand, Calvert examines the cultural, social, economic and political context within which Qutb's political ideas and activism formed. By doing so, he discusses how foreign domination, corruption, social, cultural and economic turmoil, political instability, and state repression influenced not only the development of Qutb's religio-political thinking but also the formation and transformation of secular and religious ideologies and movements. The insights that Calvert provides in his book can help scholars and pundits make sense of Egyptian politics in particular and Middle Eastern and Islamist politics in general.

Finally, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* gives strong historical support to the emerging literature in political science that links radicalism to state repression. Calvert demonstrates a clear link between Qutb's radicalization and his imprisonment and torture by the Nasser regime. He also shows how state repression led the Muslim Brotherhood to the use of violence in the 1960s and early 1970s. Similarly, he associates the moderation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s with the soothing of state repression under Anwar Sadat's rule. As opposed to the widely held oversimplification that presents Qutb as the intellectual father of radical Islam, Calvert offers a nuanced perspective and provides the context within which Qutb's radical ideas formed. The totalistic nature of Qutb's political ideology owes a lot to the state repression under Nasser. Furthermore, the subsequent extremist groups that subscribed to Qutb's ideas exaggerated his justification of violence. To Calvert, Qutb defended an uncompromising struggle against the "illegitimate" Egyptian state and the West but not indiscriminate violence. To Calvert, Qutb himself would not have approved the violence

of the extremists in Egypt in 1970s and 1980s and the civilian killings of today's transnational radical Islamist groups.

The insights that one gets from *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* can help us account for the future of Islamist politics in Egypt. The Egyptian military takeover in Egypt in July 2013 and the subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood can bring a new cycle of radicalization. At the time of the writing in late August 2013, there was no serious signs of radicalization in the Muslim Brotherhood, but depending on the trajectory of events, either Muslim Brotherhood may rereadicalize or already radical groups in Egypt may recruit more militants from among the supporters of the Brotherhood.

Calvert's study provokes further scholarship. Throughout the book, the interaction of Qutb's ideas and Egypt's socio-political context seems to be the key to understand the formation of a radical Islamist thinker. Scholars can further refine Calvert's arguments by looking at different Islamic scholars in other contexts. For example, it is worth to ask why Said Nursi in Turkey did not become a radical in an increasingly authoritarian environment under one-party rule in the 1930s and 1940s. The academic standards and analytical framework that Calvert puts in his book can be a good start for such an inquiry.

In the beginning of his book, Calvert writes that he went to Egypt in the late 1980s to study the history and culture of Mamluks to become a mediaevalist. I am glad that he ended up studying modern Egyptian history. Otherwise, we would have lost a great historian of modern Islamist politics in Egypt. With its clarity and prose, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* is an excellent read for both scholars and general readers.