Political Islam and Democratic Change in Egypt

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Abstract

The revolutionary events of January and February 2011, in Egypt, opened the door for democratization in Egypt. The new phase were not only in Egypt but also in the whole Arab World whereby it has been characterized by new waves of democratization in Middle Eastern politics. In this regard, the purpose of this article examined the relationship between Islam and democracy and the impact of Islamic political activism on democratization behind the political liberalization process in Egypt. In this analysis, The Arab Spring created an opportunity for the Islamists to participate in politics openly. The Muslim Brotherhood used this opening approach power. But, the monarchies will resist the revolution affecting them by trying to confine the problem to other countries. However, as events in Egypt remained immune to the effects of the Arab spring. The sooner the ruling elites understand this, the more peaceful and controlled the democratic transition will be.

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Introduction

The 'Arab Spring', which in effect began with the toppling of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in the early months of 2011, has forced the Arab states to face many challenges even before democratic regimes have replaced the old authoritarian ones.

In Tunisia and Egypt, the overthrow of the regime had the consensus support of the entire opposition, as well as the youth and other segments of society. Even while the protests were in progress, the demonstrators called for the establishment of a civic democratic regime that would respect citizens' political freedoms and be based on equal citizenship, with no distinction of religion, sex, or class.

At this point it is very important to examine the challenge that political Islam poses to the establishment of democracy in Egypt. After the regime was overthrown, however, and the preparations to determine the future of the Egyptian system began, political Islam could aspire to lead the state. The ambition to lead or at least be partners in the new regime had become realistic and more pragmatic in nature.

Defining 'political Islam'

The contemporary phenomenon popularly referred to as political Islam or Islamism. The term Islamists (al-Islamiyyun) is usually applied to the last three categories (i.e. salafis, fundamentalists and neo-fundamentalists). It implies a conscious, determined choice of an Islamic doctrine, rather than the simple fact of being born a Muslim, or even of being a pious practising one. The term 'political Islam' (al-Islam al-siyasi) is more often confined to the last two categories (the fundamentalists and the neo-fundamentalists) as these are the ones that tend to emphasise the political nature of Islam, and to engage themselves in direct anti-State activities (Ayubi, 1991: 52).

Democracy and Political Islam

Professors John Esposito and John Voll (Georgetown University) are two leading scholars. They have written that the "Islamic heritage contains both broad concepts of potential positive significance for democratization" as well as "many concepts and traditions that could provide the foundation for concepts of 'constitutional opposition' and limits on arbitrary government power." However, they critiqued the negative interpretations of Islam's democratic potential because they are based on "two faulty assumptions that democracy is possible in one form, and that Islam can be expressed in only one way." Their approach is rooted in a comparative study of religion, history, and politics and a criticism of the mainstream scholarly and media's one-dimensional representations of Islam/Muslims that suggest that Muslim societies and political movements are monolithic and a threat to the West. A core argument from this group is that violent elements on the fringe of society do not represent or reflect the moderate mainstream (Esposito and Voll 1994, 3; 1996, 51, 42). In their work, they have sought to highlight the diversity of Muslims societies and political movements by focusing on their evolutionary character and the points of commonality between evolving Islamic traditions and the modern demands of politics.

Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori have also written extensively on the relationship between Islam and politics. In a jointly authored book, Muslim Politics (1996), they sought to challenge the Islamic exceptionalism thesis by exploring the nature of Muslim political behavior via a focus on the

intersection of values, symbols, and political change. "Doctrinal change, like all change," they have written, "is complex and is often tied to rearrangements in political structures." Criticizing the establishment school's claim of Muslim essentialism they have argued that assertions "that credos, beliefs, or traditions are timeless and immemorial should not obscure the fact that they are subject to constant modification and change." In this Islam is no different from any other religious tradition. Their emphasis is on the socioeconomic, political, and historical context that shapes debates on Islam and democracy, and they categorically reject the idea that there is a fossilized Islamic "blueprint" that shapes Muslim attitudes toward democracy today (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 16).

In addition, El-Solh categorizes political Islam's attitude to democracy into three main groups. The first group is completely opposed to the democratic regime from purely theological and religious perspective. The second group believes that Islam embodies democratic elements and they should be cultivated; they note in particular the concept of al-shura (consultation) practiced in the Islamic context since the time of Prophet Mohammed till the present time but with varying degrees and magnitudes. The third group is willing to adopt Western democracy and believes that the democratic theory that has been applied in other places can succeed in Muslim society as well and that Muslim societies are not exceptional to that. In this section, we will focus on the Muslim Brotherhood's initiatives for political reform in Egypt in 2005. This initiative was the Egyptian movement's first political platform of its type since its founding; it reflects, among other things, the Brotherhood's tendency to increased integration with

the existing regime. In March 2004, the movement's then–General Guide, Mohammad Mahdi 'Aqef, presented the Brotherhood's platform, with its proposals for political reforms in Egypt. In an interview, Aqef explained that the platform was intended to present the movement's nationalistic and Islamic views on the issues associated with political reform, such as democracy and elections and the status of the various branches of government and the future interaction between Islamization and democratization in the Egyptian society (El-Solh 1993, 57–63).

Egyptian Political Transformations

The main conclusion to be drawn from this review is that Egypt's road to democracy has been slow, limited, and bumpy. Egypt's democratic experience before 1952 lasted for only three decades and was characterized by frequent interventions from either the King or the British in directions that suited their particular interests rather than the democratic process. Government turnover was not necessarily dictated by popular sovereignty, but rather by the relative influence of the King and the British. However, during that cera, Egypt experienced the benefits of a free press and civil society as well as the assertion of democratic expression as an aspirational goal amongst many segments of society.

The Sadat democratization processes represented a major political shift from the single-party authoritarian regime established after the 1952 coup had entrenched the country in a military authoritarian single-party system which virtually controlled all aspects of political life. This tentative shift began in the mid-1970s, when Sadat established his own authority after the October 1973 war, and launched a process of

democratization from above. The triggers of the process emanated from the regime rather than from grass roots or pluralistic representatives of Egyptian society. Sadat introduced a new system of controlled multi-partyism and liberalism in which the regime engineered the entire process.

However, as criticism of his foreign and economic policies mounted, Sadat de-railed the process, and his final acts were to amend the constitution to pave the road for an indefinite presidency, greater state control over public expression, and the arrest of virtually all opposition leaders from diverse political trends.

The first decade of the Mubarak era was characterized bya national political reconciliation, but the traditions of regime monopoly over the main directions of the political process, and the fusion of the ruling party and the state, persisted. The same party continued to rule by virtue of the backing of the state apparatus, and few parliamentary elections were judged as free. These trends persisted after the end of the Cold War and the ensuing global democratic transformations. Some democratization measures were introduced, but they did not drastically change the reality of the dominance of a single party backed by the state apparatus. Although the number of political parties increased from 5 to 24 legal parties, most of them had to struggle to obtain recognition through the courts, while several other proposed parties were denied legal recognition. In addition, opposition parties remained virtually ineffective due to a series of legal and extra-legal government constraints imposed on political life in Egypt, and they did not pose any challenge to the ruling NDP. Although the constitutional amendments

introduced in 2005 and 2007 represented a shift from the old referendum system installed during the Nasser era, they also put severe restrictions on the process of genuine presidential political competition. The result was that despite some advances in the areas of freedom of the press and limited multi-partyism, democratization was not allowed to flourish in Egypt under Mubarak.

The Egyptian January 2011 uprising initially created hopes that a genuine process of Egyptian democratization would take off, and that through such popular legitimacy Egypt would restore its traditional leadership role in the Arab regional system. However, as forces with contradictory projects competed for post-revolutionary power in Egypt, these expectations appeared to be more a product of wishful thinking than of objective analysis. Today, the old elites remain well-entrenched in the structures of economic and political power. The revolutionaries who initiated the uprising did not assume leading positions in dismantling the old authoritarian regime, nor were they successful in the building of a new democratic one. Ironically, the anti-revolutionary forces assumed these tasks, clearly with purpose and eventual success. For the first time, we have a democratic project designed and implemented by elements that were either the main actors in the old dictatorship, or were not part of the revolutionary movement but were quick to kidnap the revolution. Conversely, the revolutionaries who ignited the uprising were marginalized and even faced a campaign of character assassination by the new ruling elites. Under these conditions, the structure of the 'uncivil state' in Egypt has remained largely intact, raising doubts whether a more democratic Egypt will emerge from the

ongoing political transitions.

Political Islam and Authoritarianism in Egypt

The Rival relationship between Islamic and Arab secular nationalist forces characterized much of contemporary Arab politics, particularly in Egypt. This conflict was deeply divisive, since it created what has been identified as an "identity crisis" in many parts of the Arab world.

The colonial legacy in the Arab world did not facilitate the development of a minimal level of consensus over collective identity as the region was fragmented by the competing colonial powers without regard to local considerations. This legacy, in fact, led the Arab nationalist movement to experience heinous setbacks because, while independence was eventually achieved, it failed to establish its 'ideal' nation-state and obstructed the Arab qutriyah state from developing a sense of collective identity or national unity, which is vital for the progress of the democratization process. Indeed, both pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, the predominant aspirations of post-independence Arab societies, pushed away from or undermined the legitimacy of the Arab qutriyah state. Consequently, for the post-independence Arab nationalist regimes, democracy was a lower priority and had to be sacrificed or delayed in order to commit more resources and energy to the grand objective of achieving Arab unity and establishing the ideal Arab nation-state.

'Abd al-Nasser's revolutionary regime promoted a unitary nationalist identity through coercive and authoritarian means and harshly suppressed political expression of Islamic identity. He used pan-Arab and socialist ideology as a ground to stifle political dissent and pluralism, dissolving all political parties and banning the Muslim Brotherhood movement and persecuting its members. Although Sadat introduced some political liberalization measures that initially appeared to be moving towards genuine democratization, as soon as he managed to consolidate his personal power, he reversed the process and restricted the arena of tolerated political activity. Sadat also resorted to the previous policies of political repression and containment as well as the suppression of the political expression of Islamic identity. On the whole, Sadat preserved the essence of personal authoritarianism and prevented any genuine democratization or effective political participation. Arab nationalist forces that dominated the political scene in post-independent Egypt used the nationalist ideology as a ground for curtailing individual and political freedoms, suppressing pluralism and political dissent and obstructing the democratization process. Both Nasser's and Sadat's repressive policies resulted in the emergence of radical ideologies, such as Qutb's thought, and violent groups, such as al-Jihad and al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah.

According to Raymond A. Hinnnebush, in a weak state-weak society scenario, neither state nor society has the strength to reform. Egypt received debt relief from western powers in return for its support for the Iraq war in 1990s. The failure of Mubarak's policies to tackle the socio-economic and political crisis, made ground for democratic upsurge in Egypt. The unresolved problems increase Egypt's vulnerability to international forces allowing them to impose reform. This loss of autonomy deprives Egypt of the ability to craft reform according to its own interests. Mubarak also inherited Sadat's legacy of infitah. Infitah sought to replace etatism with foreign, Arab, and private capital as the engines of development but, in failing fully to roll back Nasser's

heritage; it did not create the necessary investment climate (Raymond 1993, 159-160).

According to the Muslim Brotherhood's platform, implementing the political reform project requires unification of all of the political forces in Egypt. The government cannot carry out and lead political reform by itself, without the cooperation of the other political actors in the state, mainly political parties, media, public opinion, civil society and the trade unions.

The Brotherhood plans for political reform, which testifies to their ideological evolution, adjustment to democratic values, and willingness to be involved in democratization. The movement defined its ideal political regime in this way: "We favor a democratic, constitutional, parliamentary republic, within the framework of Islamic values." This introduction is compatible with the Egyptian constitution's definition of the regime as a constitutional republic. The Egyptian constitution defines Muslim religious law as the chief source of state jurisprudence. That is, the Muslim Brotherhood concurs with the Egyptian constitution's definition of the regime an important step in its adjustment to the values of the current system. Democracy became a central issue in the Muslim Brotherhood's proposed substantial political reform. The platform states that Egypt's independence, strength, international standing, and freedom to make political decisions cannot possibly be realized without a democratic regime with wider popular base of grassroots.

Political Islam after Morsi

In the first half 2011–2012 Parliamentary election, Khayrat al-Shater, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's "iron man", presented a vision for a new overall strategy for the movement in the post-Mubarak era he was tasked to design. The strategy he was developing has often been referred to as The Nahda (Renaissance) Project, and it was aimed to utilise the great collective power of the movement to help push the Ummah forward in all fields on the basis of an Islamic vision.

The Project's stated mission consisted of the following elements:

1. Restoring Islam in its all-encompassing conception;

2. Subjugating people to God;

3. Instituting the religion of God; As part of the perception of Islam as an all-encompassing framework [nizam shamil], presenting the Islamic way in every aspect of daily life;

4. Empowering of God's religion;

5. Establishing the Nahda of the Ummah on the basis of Islam (al-Shater 2012).

In this regard, the main Muslim Brotherhood thinkers who considered the question of democracy believe that their suggested system, an elected ruler advised by a committee of religious scholars, is superior to western democracy; furthermore, they believe that the West adopted what were originally Muslim concepts.

The political ideology of Muslim Brotherhood was reflected to the new Egyptian constitution drafted by majority of members of Islamic movements, both Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups. Articles concerning Islamic nature of the state and legislation, specifying minorities to Christians and Jews and finally protecting rights of women as long as they don't contravene Sharia, raised concerns Brotherhood's attempts to monopolize power in the post-Mubarak Egypt. Implementation of these articles led to the conclusion that in the movement's 85 th anniversary, Hasan al-Banna's legacy still present especially with reference to the rights of women and minorities. However,

as Brotherhood stand out for more political involvement, the movement retreat from its long standing strategy of bottom up social change to top down systemic transformation.

The overthrow of president Morsi on 3 July2013 meant the end of a hope in the Egyptian history and termination of the political experiment that could take place only with the concent of the army. Moreover, the Coup came with many iconic figure of the 25 January revolution in prison. With the counter-revolution in power it seems that the military regime is making sure to severely punish not Muslim Brotherhood but also everyone who participated in the 25 January revolution in prison.

Overall, the discrepancy between action and discourse on democracy on the part of the West does not bode well for democracy in the region. Perhaps more critically, Islamists are increasingly being pushed into a choice between ideology and democracy. Faced with adversity even at this very basic level of democratic participation, Islamists will inevitably and increasingly have a harder time committing to democracy.

On the one hand, there is democracy, which many Islamist groups seem to endorse at some level; groups like the Muslim Brotherhood view it as a useful conduit to promote their ideologies, much like many other political parties. On the other hand, democracy appears as an ideologically loaded concept. It is monopolized by some Western countries and invoked whenever it is convenient for these countries, along with a prescription

as to how it should work. Such a conception is, needless to say, inaccurate. Yet, historically, democracy as a Western and ideologically loaded concept epitomizes the West's relationship to the Muslim world since the colonial times, according to Islamist ideology.

As the most popular political group across the region, Islamists' relationship to democracy is a key component for the prospect of successful and sustainable democratic experience. The removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's government and the ensuing crackdown on the group, therefore, is likely to delay the true emergence of democracy in Egypt's near future.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring has transcended many seasons and is likely to continue on its trajectory for many more. The trajectory will inevitably be uneven as the objective conditions in each of the countries in the region, their capacity to respond and the interests of the external players will vary in each case. Absence of any tradition of democracy or functioning political parties, the existence of internal social and sectarian divides, and high levels of religious prevailing in the region will prevent quick democratization of the whole region.

The monarchies will resist the revolution affecting them by trying to confine the problem to other countries. However, as events in Egypt remain immune to the effects of the Arab spring. The sooner the ruling elites understand this, the more peaceful and controlled the democratic transition will be.

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