

EGYPT: THE MARRIAGE OF ISLAMISM AND THE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT The “January 25 Revolution” was not a classic revolution. President Mubarak’s fall did not entail the overthrow of the regime, neither alter the elites or destroy their institutions, nor reverse the social situation. Although power structures and economic patterns were not removed, Mubarak’s fall set an end to exclusive authoritarian despotism and initiated a process of power sharing; a so called passive revolution characterised by the absorption of the “enemies’ elites” into the system. From this perspective, legalisation has been only a further step in the Islamists’ long and rocky road of integration through moderation. Initially based on tactical considerations, shifts in methods and behaviour usually also evoke a shift in emphasis from ideological conceptions to political pragmatism. The absorption of the Islamist elites supported a process of embourgeoisement and de-ideologization. This did not entail a departure from Islamic tenets, but rather from ideological conceptions which seemed more and more unrealistic in a globalized world. The integration of de-radicalised and moderated socially conservative Islamist groups with market economy and parliamentary democracy promises not only the prevention of political and economic turmoil, but also guarantees the reinforcement of the existing patterns of domination.

The rise of Islam

From 1973 on Egypt experienced *infitah*; economic liberalisation. *Infitah* implied the radical departure from Nasserist state-led industrialisation and modernisation policies. Just like in many other countries, economic liberalisation went hand in hand with “Islamisation”. Islamisation defines neo-conservative social and cultural policies emanated by state institutions. A

bundle of measures including a rise in religious programs on TV and radio, a new emphasis on religious values in school curricula and an increased use of Islamic symbols in the public space. Consequently, Islamic symbols, concepts, rhetoric and behaviour began to dominate the public space and have increasingly permeated the everyday lives of many Egyptians. Islamisation as a state policy aimed at filling the void which had emerged after the debacle of the 1967 War and the de-

legitimization of Nasserist modernisation concepts and it was considered as a means to placate social discontent. Hence, Islamisation aimed at restoring the regime's authority.

At the same time "Islamisation" encouraged the emergence of a heterogeneous and vivid Islamic movement. A whole industry of an Islamic civil society emerged. Under the benevolent eyes of the state – the regime regarded them as an antidote to leftist and communist movements – a huge number of associations, independent mosques and street sheikhs became the agents of a new Islamic conservatism.

But this policy also limited the government's scope of action in directing and influencing social policy. In the light of economic adjustment programs which aimed at creating a slimmer state, Islamic welfare and charity organisations gradually compensated the state's eroding welfare services. Particularly in remote and neglected areas, Islamic organisations challenged the state's hegemony.

Whereas Islamic conservative movements began to dominate large parts of Egyptian society, the regime paid attention to contain their activities and to confine them as far as possible to the non-political sphere. In contrast to his two predecessors, President Mubarak hoped to control a growing Islamist movement through the controlled inclusion of moderate mainstream Islamist opposition into the system.¹ Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were allowed to run as inde-

¹ Augustus Norton in: Hefner, Robert W. (ed.). (2005), *Remaking Muslim Politics. Pluralism, Contestation; Democratization*, Princeton.

pendent candidates in elections and were represented in parliament. At the same time the regime denied Islamists any legalisation and it paid attention to limit Islamist representation in parliament through election fraud and gerrymandering.

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number of ultra-conservative clergymen, judges and bureaucrats within state institutions grew. Their fatwas, verdicts and day-to-day decisions began to challenge the hegemony of the inherently secular regime from within. The regime's tactic guaranteed

that political Islam was not able to engender regime change, but it also turned Egypt into an overwhelmingly conservative "Islamic society".

After Mubarak

The fall of President Mubarak on February 13, 2011 was not brought about by Islamists, but it was rather a young and disappointed mainly bourgeois youth which felt frustrated with stagnation and which saw in a highly clientalistic economy only limited future prospects.

Although, the events which led to President Mubarak's departure were enthusiastically labelled as the "January 25 Revolution", Mubarak's resignation later turned out not to be the beginning of the fall of the regime, but rather as the regime's necessary concession in order to



maintain as much of the old order as possible. President Mubarak who stood for the system had turned into a burden for its maintenance.

Consequently, the “January 25 Revolution” was not a classic revolution. It did neither overthrow the system, nor alter the elites or destroy their institutions, or reverse the social situation. Nevertheless, even though power structures and patterns were not removed, February 13, 2011 set an end to authoritarian despotism and initiated a process of power sharing; a passive revolution characterised by the absorption of the “enemies’ elites” into the system.²

A passive revolution in the making

With Mubarak’s resignation, supreme power was transferred to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). The SCAF has controlled the transition process ever since. From the onset, the army had made it clear; it considered transition as a technical and not as a political process. The army’s major concern has been maintaining stability and continuity.

Considering secular leftist and liberal protest groups’ demands for a fundamental break with the Mubarak-era, de-radicalised moderate Islamists who are opposed to any revolutionary turmoil, appeared as natural allies in the SCAF’s struggle for maintaining the dominant system.

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rather vague statements regarding the implementation of religious law. A moderate discourse aimed at reaching out to non-Islamist constituencies, to national and international media, foreign partners and investors and to the business circles. In the face of

Islamisation had absorbed de-radicalised and moderated Islamists into the dominant system; however they had been denied legalisation and political participation. President Mubarak’s fall removed most of the legal barriers and opened up the way to party politics. In the wake of the “Revolution”, Islamists came in various shades to the political arena. The Muslim Brotherhood founded the Freedom and Justice Party and even Salafis, who under Mubarak had been considered an apolitical movement, decided to form parties and to participate in elections.

Participation initiated further moderation in discourse and appearance. While Islamists have gained a dominant role in post-Mubarak Egypt, Islamist parties have been careful to appear modest. They have, for the most part avoided touching upon controversial issues such as the role of women or Copts and they have made

pervasive corruption, the religiousness and integrity of leading Islamist political figures was however the strongest message to their constituencies.

This strategy of moderation certainly contributed to the Islamists’ landslide victory in the country’s first free parliamentary elections after President Mubarak’s departure. Different Islamist parties all together reached more than 70 per cent in votes. Consequently Islamists

² Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, New York, 2005.



will also play a crucial role in writing the country's new constitution.

However, involvement in representative politics has also disclosed the deep fractions between the different Islamist parties. Whereas Islamist politics had been thought to be the monopoly of the Muslim Brotherhood and groups which derived from it, the emergence of a strong Salafi political party has revealed the existence of a strong Islamist alternative. While both groups are committed to the *telos* of an Islamic order, methods, approaches and appearance strongly differ, not to mention different interpretations of religious sources. Differences are also reflecting diverging social constituencies and their conflicting interests.

The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the Salafis have decided to nominate candidates for presidential elections points at the on-going transformation connected with political party activism.

The long road of integration through moderation

De-radicalization and moderation are long-term processes which are usually emanating from the elites of movements and rarely from the grassroots. Initially based on tactical considerations, shifts in methods and behaviour usually also evoke changes in ideology.

In the 1970s the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered as the mother of contemporary Islamism in Egypt, made a serious tactical shift. After years of cruel persecution under President Nasser, the leadership decided to give up its claim for domination and instead adopted the path of integration with the prevalent system. This serious shift in strategy was the result of a "Gentlemen's agreement" with Pre-

sident Sadat. In return for de-radicalization, the regime tolerated the MB as long as it confined itself to Islamic preaching, stayed out of politics and refrained from violence and avoided criticism of the president, his family and his policies. In Sadat's power system, moderate Islamist movements, and in particular the MB functioned as a counterbalance to Communist and Arab socialist groups.

President Mubarak continued Sadat's strategy of toleration without legalisation, but he conceded comparably more political space to the Islamists. Members of the Brotherhood were allowed to participate in a confined and controlled democratic space. From the 1980s on members of the Brotherhood ran as independent candidates in parliamentary election and in the elections for profession syndicates. Political involvement enforced the breaks within the movement. The question how far should political involvement go divided the movement. Older members of the leadership feared that political involvement might challenge the regime and provoke its anger, while a younger generation defended the idea that only political involvement can bring about change.

"Taking part" in the political game certainly affected the actors. Political participation not only shaped appearance, methods and behaviour but also gradually induced change in ideology. Participation in elections and representation in parliament led to a shift in emphasis from ideological conceptions to political pragmatism.

Islamist intellectuals opened up to universal discourses. Faced with the despotism of illiberal authoritarian regimes they increasingly adopted notions of democracy, human rights, political freedoms and accountability into their

conceptions. What Asef Bayat and others have termed as “post-Islamism” represents an endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty.³

Amr Hamzawy and Nathan Brown⁴ analysed that the Muslim Brotherhood’s religious and moral platform in parliament clearly declined in salience over the last ten years and that Brotherhood deputies had been more preoccupied with parliamentary debates on constitutional amendments, political freedoms and human rights issues.

Integration with a bourgeois system which was established by economic liberalisation policies implied also the movement’s embourgeoisement. Many members of the organisation’s leadership are themselves successful businessmen who have benefited from market liberalisation. Hence, the MB adopted an economic discourse which has reflected the interests of its leading members and potent supporters. The process of embourgeoisement was accompanied by gradual de-ideologization and the adoption of political pragmatism. This did not entail a departure from Islamic tenets, but rather from ideological conceptions which seemed more and more unrealistic in a globalized world. The MB has advocated a notion of Islam which has been compatible with liberal market economy. The MB’s economic views have been in line with the Mubarak regime’s economic

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liberalisation policies. Its economic program has embraced the reduction of taxes, privatisation, and foreign investments.⁵

While the Brotherhood’s marriage with free market economy has converged with the worldview of an increasingly conservative bourgeois middle-class, it has at the same time reduced its contacts with the lower classes to social and charity work through its charity organisations. The MB has mainly found political support among the upper-middle classes, but the movement has been increasingly lacking the enthusiasm and the social dimension that would infect the impoverished masses.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s moderation and gradual rapprochement with the bourgeois centre induced also the de-radicalisation of more radical elements of the Islamist spectrum. The Salafis’ decision to form political parties and to participate in elections represents a dramatic tactical shift towards integration with the system, comparable to that made by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s.

Salafism does not stand for a united movement, but rather consists of a collection of ultra-orthodox sheikhs, who have their own following and their own associations. Their common aim is to restore the purity of early Islam. They thereby refer to the time of the prophet and the early generations of his followers (*Salaf*). This does not imply a simple return to the past, but rather aims at freeing Islam from historical deviations,

³ Bayat, Asef, Making Islam Democratic. Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn, 2007.

⁴ Brown, Nathan J. and Hamzawy, Amr, Between Religion and Politics, 2010.

⁵ Schapiro, Avi Asher, The GOP Brotherhood of Egypt: http://www.salon.com/writer/avi_asher_schapiro/



distortions and alterations and at restoring an idealised pure and pristine Islam.

Salafi groups mainly gained a foothold in rural-urban eras. These are impoverished, previously rural areas at the periphery of growing cities, inhabited by poor people with mainly poor education backgrounds. In the absence of the state, mosques have been the centres of authority, information exchange and personal encounter. Mosque related organisations as charity and welfare networks or education institutes have played an important role in the socialisation of youth.

The Mubarak regime tolerated the proliferation of Salafism, as it hoped that Salafi groups would counterbalance the Muslim Brotherhood, but also because Salafism used to be a politically quietist movement which stood aloof from politics. The movement also benefited largely from conservative donors on the Arabian Peninsula. With their help many Salafi TV stations emerged over the last years, emitting the movement's clear and comprehensible call for purification. Consequently Salafism grew to an influential religious trend.

Although, Salafis were politically quietist, people with inclinations to conservative Salafi interpretations of Islam gained influence at the lower echelons of religious and judicial authorities. Court decisions lean on conservative interpretations of Islamic law and increasingly conservative views within al-Azhar, the highest religious authority in Egypt increasingly challenged the regime's hegemony.

Despite of being a movement which appeals to a great extend to the under-

dogs in society, Salafis have hardly criticised capitalism or market economy. Their concerns rather revolve around moral issues as the separation of sexes, moral conduct and an Islamic lifestyle. Although their religious views converge with extremists, the majority of Salafis have rejected the use of violence in order to establish their aspired Islamic system.

The decision to form political parties and to participate in elections points at growing pragmatism. The decision to

participate does not entail a departure from the utopian dream of restoring pristine Islam, but it points at the conviction that this dream can be only achieved through integration with the system. Salafis have explained their tactical shift as a contribution to the public benefit (*maslaha*).

Experiences with the transformation processes of other movements show that de-radicalisation in methods and tactics evolves into moderation in approaches in favour of growing pragmatism.

Paradoxically, the formation of political parties supports the centralisation and bureaucratisation of movements. This "professionalization" almost inevitably induces the separation of the political organization from the religious and social movement. This outsourcing of the political agenda can be evaluated as a process of secularization. However, this should not be misinterpreted as a departure from religion, religious concepts or ultra-conservatism, but rather perceived as the separation of the religious sacred from the political realm.

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In conclusion

While the emergence of Islamist parties has understandably caused concerns for the country's and the region's stability, the formation of Islamist parties, their participation in elections and their interactions with other Islamist as well as with secular parties can be also perceived as further steps in a long and enduring transformation process. Reformed Islamist parties all over the Muslim World have undergone a process of de-ideologisation and adaptation to the requirements of a globalised and highly interconnected liberal market economy. Paradoxically political professionalism has inevitably implied also the secularisation of political action pushing the sacred out of politics. Islamist conceptions of state and economy might have lost power, but Islamist conceptions of values and society are still appealing in face of pervasive corruption, Western domination and felt cultural sell-out.

The integration of de-radicalised and moderated socially conservative Islamist groups with Capitalism promises not only the prevention of political and economic turmoil, but also guarantees the reinforcement of the existing patterns of domination. Hence, less than a revolution in its classical sense, the "January 25 Revolution" rather falls into Gramsci's concept of a "passive revolution". Passive Revolution describes the dominant classes' strategies of preventing revolutionary turmoil by integrating moderate elements of the emergent revolutionary classes into the system and of thereby strengthening its hegemony.

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