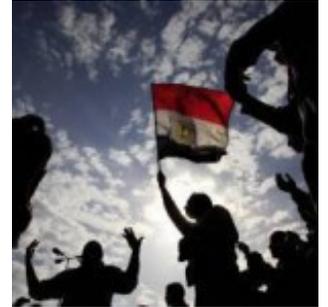


The road not taken: how Frost is teaching us to understand the Muslim Brotherhood in the fight against Al Qaeda

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Posted by AD Brown

In this article Meor Alif examines the future of an Egypt governed by the Muslim Brotherhood, arguing that both expectations and preconceived notions of the Brotherhood should be adjusted in light of their historical legacy in Egypt and the reality of the situation on the ground.



“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both”

For decades the international community pretended to lose sleep over the fate that had befallen Egypt. It was not too long ago when instability, oppression, deprivation and the lack of respect for human rights were all words that we didn't even think twice to use when describing the domestic conditions that the country was under. Despite our supposed best efforts to facilitate change, Egypt remained a quicksand for hope and with its hopelessness, thousands upon thousands of fellow human beings were left to rot under a government that they simply had no say in. And as though that was not bad enough – the real irony of the bigger picture was that Mubarak and his league of truly extraordinary gentlemen claimed to be coherent with democracy, and worst of all, our tacit acceptance and cooperation with his regime made a mockery out of the universal principles which we claim to stand for. Rather than change it – we lived with it. And we tried to make a profit out of it – after all what were we to do? It was just how it was and we were just making the best out of it.

Well, when enough is enough, three weeks is all it takes.

The events that unfolded between 25th January and 11th February 2011 were magnificent. The word uprising has never described something so meaningful in the 21st century until it was used to describe the protests that occurred in Egypt. The near impossible was achieved through several series of mass protests in Egypt, and now, almost a year after that fateful February day when Hosni Mubarak was escorted to the dustbin of history, the world and the entire Egyptian nation is still reeling from the shockwaves that Tahrir created.

However, the bigger question remains, what will the future look like? Can we support the change that is happening in Egypt? Can we, against every fibre of our conviction that is unwilling to support 'evil Islamists', rally behind the Muslim Brotherhood?

The devil is in the detail.

“Then took the other, as just as fair, and having perhaps the better claim”

As the story goes and we thank god that it turned out the way it did – Egypt ascended into elections and avoided the long and painful descend into civil strife. And today, as the 'democratic system' has allowed it to be so – we have the Muslim Brotherhood emerging as the 'will of the people' at the ballot boxes.

But what is Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun? Or rather, what is the Muslim Brotherhood?

To many, the Muslim Brotherhood is a statistic – it reads; Freedom and Justice Party; 253 from a total of 498 seats translating into a 47.2% majority. To others, the Brotherhood is less Hassan Al Banna and more Sayyid Qutb's Milestones, and to the rest, the Muslim Brotherhood is the new (old) Egypt. Either way, the Brotherhood is now at the cusp of meaningful historical institutional change in Egypt and for the first time since 1928, they have the means to make it count. However, despite their electoral gains (many say expectedly so) in the recent lower house elections in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is slowly feeling the squeeze of responsibility – Egyptians are hungry for progress and the Brotherhood must now deliver.

Here in the West, there are still certain sections that see the Muslim Brotherhood as the bud of a greater evil that needs to be avoided at all cost. The memory of Hosni Mubarak's removal on the 11th of February last year is now being replaced with the possibility of having to deal with Islamists at the helm of the Egypt of the future. To the sceptics, the uncompromising ambition of the Brotherhood to establish a state ruled by Sharia, the stance it adopts against Israel and the United States and the Brotherhood's commitment towards human rights is of great concern. Understandably, as with any new regime anywhere in the world, old friends as well as old foes have good reason to be wary of what is to come.

It is a real mystery why it has taken so long for the international community to realize that the Muslim Brotherhood is not going away anytime soon. The once ally to Egyptian leader Gamel Abdel Nasser has seen purge after purge attempting to eliminate it, and yet despite Nasser's best efforts at violent crackdown on the Brotherhood's political role, it survived throughout the 1950's and 1960's. Even under the restrictions and hurdles that the Brotherhood had to endure under Sadat and subsequently under Mubarak, the Brotherhood still managed to somehow find a nice quite corner on the political spectrum in Egypt for itself.

The important thing to consider is this;

If the Brotherhood were really Islamists who were interested in being radicals, by right, they would have done so a long time ago. Instead, the Brotherhood has, since the 1970's, refrained from engaging in any violent activism. Furthermore, it has also over the years, consciously made an effort to move into mainstream politics in Egypt, which is remarkable considering how futile and pointless mainstream politics really was during the Mubarak years. The Brotherhood first participated in local and parliamentary elections as independent candidates in 1984 and has consistently been involved in subsequent elections since then. In 2005, it won 88 seats in the parliament which made up about 20% of the legislature and at that point, it constituted the largest opposition block against the Mubarak regime. Tactically, it has displayed that it is willing to work within the system even when the system was broken – something which is worthy of a mention, a testament to their patience and an indication of a more moderate motivation than a radical one.

Moreover, and rather cynically, I would point out that the beauty of a democratic system lies in its respect for the public's will. And it would be rather arrogant to discount the validity of the choice that the Egyptian public has made at the polls on the account that the outcome fits rather awkwardly with what all of us had in mind.

| *"Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back"*

What about the Brotherhood's historic ties with Al Qaeda?

One of the biggest concerns when discussing the Brotherhood is that of the connection between it and Al Qaeda.

Understandably, there are many out there who unequivocally deem the connection to be too close for comfort. They share the view that Al Qaeda is a spawn from the words of Sayyid Qutb who was once a member of the Brotherhood and by the thinnest of implications, this fact is used to pin culpability to the Brotherhood as being 'just the same'. Moreover, it has become an open secret by now that Ayman Al Zawihiri was a great admirer of Qutb and his

involvement with the Brotherhood at a young age makes it that much harder for a reasonable person to ignore the fact that the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and subsequently Al Qaeda has some roots in the Muslim Brotherhood.

There is no denying that the Brotherhood is a strong intellectual movement that has influenced great swaths of individuals – it has inspired many and many have taken inspiration from it. However, as we are rarely convinced by spurious causations to quench our curiosity, it would therefore be, in the words of Ed Hussain, a Senior Fellow from the Council for Foreign Relations, “wrong for us to make the brotherhood responsible for the actions of all of its intellectual offspring”.

The truth is that public spats between Ayman Al Zawahiri and the Muslim Brotherhood have become somewhat of a permanent fixture in the Islamists fight for broad based support amongst Egyptians and the Arab world in general. In attempts at ‘out Muslim-ing’ the Muslim Brotherhood, Zawahiri has not been shy to be publicly at logger heads with the Brotherhood on issues such as the Brotherhood’s participation in previous elections under Mubarak – claiming amongst others, that the Brotherhood had ‘abandoned’ the religion for democracy. It would be careless for us to forget that even early on during the Egyptian revolution when Al Qaeda called for violent Jihad amongst the Egyptians in the midst of all the protests – the Muslim Brotherhood was quick to disassociate and condemn these statements from Al Qaeda by insisting on their firm stance against using violence. The long standing exchange of blows (no pun intended) between the two entities is indicative of the undeniable gap between the Brotherhood and the more robust militant Salafists approach of conducting politics and promoting Islam.

Moreover, further proof of the Brotherhood’s moderate tendencies is the restraint that they exercised in the early stages of the revolution in self limiting their own involvement in the revolution to maintain the pedestrian character of the protests. Keep in mind that members of the Brotherhood were also amongst the many whom alongside others, protected Christians during prayers and pledged early support for the seemingly western oriented El Baradei.

Frightening as it is, an objective observer must firstly come to terms with the reality that although the discourse coming out of the Brotherhood is wrapped rather thickly with religious overtones, the Brotherhood’s true bite which allows it to resonate convincingly with the larger Egyptian public has more to do with its sensitivity towards very real contemporary social and economic problems in Egypt rather than the seemingly abstract conception of an Islamic state. Today, their political grievance is only different from others in so far as it is expressed through a religious worldview, in which other worldviews, like that of the Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, can equally perform the same function. Hence, although these real life ‘worldly’ problems like unemployment and social welfare are expressed through reference to religion instead of a 20th century thinker, it does not necessarily make those grievances a purely religious one.

Furthermore, over the years, the Muslim Brotherhood has shown a willingness of moving away from explicit Islamist content as a political platform and has opted instead for more moderate positions on different issues. Even their language has changed to reflect their mood. The Brotherhood nowadays hardly ever mentions an Islamic state anymore, rather they lay claim to the ambition of creating a democratically viable civil state with references to Islam. They have also seen it fit to pledge a willingness to work with other secular and liberal parties, and recently announced that they want to include as many groups as possible, from different backgrounds to work together for the future of Egypt. They have also seen it fit to pledge a willingness to work with other secular and liberal parties, and recently announced that they intend to include as many groups as possible from different backgrounds to work together for the future of Egypt. In addition, the Brotherhood also recently pledged their willingness to respect any treaties that Egypt has previously signed and have indicated that they intend to uphold their end of the Camp David treaty as long as Israel does the same. The rebranding efforts of the Brotherhood is in no means a recent development, and we need only to look at their efforts in 2005, when the Brotherhood launched an internal rebranding effort meant to fix their image in the West and to ultimately soothe any lingering suspicions that the Brotherhood is dangerous.

The Brotherhood’s increasing sensitivity to public opinion is a good sign for the future of Egypt. Their awareness is an indication of a more pragmatic approach towards politics instead of the usual ideological swash buckling,

hardcore, and unflinching approach that is synonymous to the kind of Islamist group we have in our minds. Moreover, if the Brotherhood is made to realize that there is more at stake to be in cooperation with the West through Western assistance either in the form of monetary, trade or investment incentives, it will be less likely that the Brotherhood would be willing to engage willy-nilly in precarious and controversial policies. Surely even the Muslim Brotherhood knows that the last thing any transitioning democracy needs are more reasons for its legitimacy to be undermined both domestically and internationally. The Brotherhood would be wise not to squander their decades of patience with rash policy making. In any case, as long as the Brotherhood can keep the gains that it can get from the West to itself without looking too much like the Nasser elites of old and distribute these gains to the public appropriately, they wouldn't find it too hard to justify their relationship to the West to any reasonable Egyptian.

In the long run, the Brotherhood would see it fit to take positive measures on issues such as internal security from destabilizing forces of terrorism like Al Qaeda to ensure its own survival. Like any government, improving the living conditions of Egyptians and ensuring that the new democratic system in place is not lost in transition to more extreme elements will come naturally – aspirations which to say the least, are congruent with the overall interests of nations in the West.

The rise of the pragmatic, more moderate group of Islamists into government deals a hard hand to the Al Qaeda circles who have for a very long time now advocated for violent resistance and revolution to institute change. However, as it is telling till this very day, their brand of change and the method in which that change is brought about is slow coming – a far cry from the difference that moderate political Islam has made in the past year. The message is clear – indiscriminate violence is so yesterday.

The only sticking point in the new arrangement of power in Egypt for the West is that of the Brotherhood's stance against Israel and its association with Hamas. Of all of the revisions that will occur, the slowest change will happen here – and this is largely due to the greater context of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and the long history behind it. However, if there is any consolation, the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood is slowly having a moderating effect on Hamas themselves. Speaking a day after the Brotherhood electoral success, Ghazi Hamad, deputy foreign minister of Hamas spoke to the press to highlight that the rising political power of Islamists in Egypt and everywhere else in the Arab world is encouraging Hamas to moderate its policies and adopt more peaceful methods to affect change.

| *"I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference"*

Either way, the way I see it, we can either moan all we want and continue to shout at the top of our lungs that we wanted a purely liberal group of individuals with little interest in fusing religion with state affairs to emerge as the replacement of Mubarak in Egypt, or we could start to smarten up and realise that considering the nature of the Brotherhood – the commitment to non violence that they have shown and their more moderate approach towards Islam and its relationship to the state – the world maybe has found the right partner to end this decade with.

In terms of priorities, what needs to be avoided at all costs at the moment is the possibility of Jihadist elements in Egypt (either through government in the form of the Al Nour party or outside government through any other means) hijacking the progress that the country has made. It would be prudent to constantly keep in mind that the Salafi section of Egypt will be relishing the opportunity to capitalize on any short comings of the Brotherhood in attempt to strengthen its own support base. We simply cannot afford to let the claim that the Brotherhood is not Muslim enough to gain resonance with the public for fear that this will be the inroad which will lead to more extreme elements gaining traction in the country and ultimately reverse the progress in Egypt.

Only time will tell and will reveal if the Brotherhood is pulling a fast one on all of us, but as it stands, we have good reasons to be optimistic of what is ahead. Yes, they might not be liberals (not that everyone should be), but at least they are democrats – and it is up to us now take the road less travelled by.

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