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Islamism in Egypt: The long road to integration
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This article is third in a special series of posts commissioned by LSE IDEAS exploring Islamism and the Arab Spring. The series also includes articles on the history of political Islam, Tunisia, Libya, and a concluding post on pluralism and minorities.

By Cengiz Günay

Islamisation

From the 1970s on Egypt has been seized by a wave of Islamic revival. The rise of Islamic identity has been closely connected with the apparent failure of western inspired modernization policies. The Islamisation of society and culture was a state policy which aimed at filling a void and functioned as a means to placate social discontent linked with liberalisation policies. State institutions began to emanate conservative cultural and social policies. Religious programs on TV and radio increased and the use of Islamic symbols was intensified.
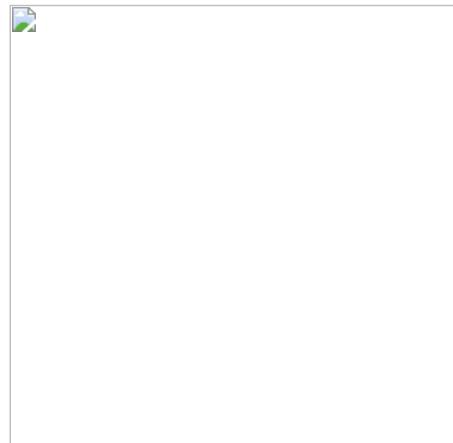
In light of the loss of a central ideology (Egypt had turned away from Arab Socialism) the state's neo-conservative policies were aimed at reinforcing hegemony, but this limited the government's scope of action in directing and influencing social policy. "Islamisation" encouraged the emergence of a heterogeneous and vivid independent Islamic spectrum. Islamic movements, centres, independent mosques, bookstores and sheikhs were agents in spreading a new Islamic consciousness, shaped by conservative Islamic values. Islamic welfare and charity organisations began to compensate the state's eroding welfare services in remote and neglected urban areas. Not all of these agents of Islamic revival pursued political goals, but most of them defended a return to conservative Islamic values. Hence, Islamic symbols, music, clothing, expressions and codes of conduct have increasingly permeated the everyday lives of many Egyptians.

But while Islamic conservatism and Islamic welfare activities were tolerated and even promoted by the regime, it also monitored and limited their political influence. The Mubarak regime followed the tactic of embracing Islamic demands in principle, in order to neutralise them in practice. This entailed a certain incorporation of Islamism into the dominant system in order to guarantee that political Islam was not able to engender regime change.

After Mubarak

Although Islamists seem to be the major winners of the Arab Spring, the protests which culminated in President Mubarak's resignation on February 13, 2011 were carried by mainly secular youth movements.

What has been enthusiastically labelled as "January 25 Revolution" was not a classic revolution. It neither overthrew the system, nor altered the composition of the elite, destroy their institutions, or reverse the social situation. With Mubarak's resignation power was transferred to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). The SCAF has controlled the transition process ever since. From day one the army made clear that it considered transition as a technical rather than 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.

Islamisation had absorbed moderated Islamists into the dominant system; however they had been denied legislative 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. As the other articles in this series demonstrate, the politicisation of Salafis may be one defining legacy of the uprisings across the region.

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 only 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 business circles. In the face of 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 landslide victory in the country's first free parliamentary elections after the departure of President Mubarak. Different Islamist parties together won more than 70 per cent of votes. Consequently, Islamists will also play a crucial role in writing the country's new constitution.

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 mainly built upon 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 constitutes a further step in an enduring process of integration with the political system.

Integration through moderation

De-radicalization and moderation are long-term processes which usually emanate from the leadership 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 (MB), which is considered the architect 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 President 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 of how far political involvement should go divided the the Brothers. 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 endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. Amr Hamzawy and Nathan Brown analysed that the Muslim Brotherhood's religious and moral platform in parliament has clearly declined in salience over the last ten years and that Brotherhood deputies had become 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 also implied 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 more pragmatic approaches. This did not entail the 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 liberalisation policies. The MB's economic program has embraced the reduction of taxes, privatisation, and foreign investments.

While the Brotherhood's marriage with free market economy has converged with the world view 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. Hence, the MB has mainly has 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.

Salafism

While the Muslim Brotherhood has gradually moved into the bourgeois centre of the political spectrum, for the socially neglected and deprived, the Salafi movement emerged as a credible political alternative. The term Salafism refers to a vast and heterogeneous spectrum of ultra-orthodox groups which seek 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, distortions and alterations and at restoring an idealised pure and pristine Islam.

Salafism does not represent a united movement, but rather consists of a collection of sheikhs, who have their own following and their own associations. Salafist 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 have played an important role in the socialisation of youth by acting as charity and welfare networks or education institutes.

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.

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. Integration inevitably entails further moderation in methods, approaches and ideology.

Paradoxically, the formation of political parties inevitably leads to 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 or religious concepts, but rather perceived as the separation of the religious sacred from the political realm.

Conclusions

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 also be read as embodying 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 the political professionalism has inevitably implied 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 the face of pervasive corruption and neocolonial perceptions of Western political, economic and cultural domination.

The integration of de-radicalised, moderate and socially conservative Islamist groups with liberal 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. This is the situation that Egypt finds itself in today.

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This article benefitted from recent policy briefs and public lectures.

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