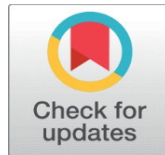


ISLAMIST MOBILIZATION UNDER ARAB SPRING: A CASE STUDY OF EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

The uprising that started in December 2010 commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, was an era of massive transformation in the political climate, the society and culture of the Arab world. It refers to a set of actions against the authorities in many states of the Middle East and North Africa, including protests, uprisings and revolutions. The aftermath of such uprisings included changes of regime within some of these nations while others degenerated into wars. Among the participants of these protests and uprisings, there were Islamist organizations, whose actions, ideology, and influence were the issues dominating the events that centred around such countries as Egypt. Drawing on the Arab Spring of 2012 in Egypt, this paper seeks to advance understanding of Islamist mobilization with a view to presenting elaborate analyses of political, social, and religious mobilization. Egypt is one of the leading and influential Arab states that can give readers a comprehensive insight into the relation between Islamism, politics and revolution.

Keywords: Egypt, Arab Spring, Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood, MENA Region, Political Islam, Democratization

1. INTRODUCTION

Egyptian Islamism can be defined as the political and ideological process by which the Egyptian state and the Egyptian civil society are made Islamic. This movement has greatly featured in Egypt modern history particularly in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. It largely draws its strength from the historical perception of Egypt as an Islamic country but also grew rapidly in reaction to colonialism, secularism and the westernization process which after the British departure from Egypt in 1952.

Islamism of the Egyptian state especially identifies with the emergence of the Islamic political parties of which the Muslim Brotherhood formed in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna is the most prominent. The Brotherhood aimed mainly at building a society which follows the Quran as the constitution via social, educational and political transformations. This disapproved the western colonialism and secularism asserting for the administration of Sharia laws. The Brotherhood developed into a social movement organization and one of the leading political movements in Egypt; however, it was experiencing periodic crackdowns by the Egyptian authorities.

Modern Islamist movements in Egypt drawn their theories from writers such as Sayyid Qutb who in the 1940s and 1950s argued that Islamic society should base their laws on Sharia, and disowned democracy and secularism which were popular in those times. The views on Jahiliya, ignorance, and the Islamic state contributed by Qutb on radical Islamist groups in both Egypt and through the Muslim world. Egyptian Islamism is not dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood only. Some other Islamist movements such as Salafist movements which embraces the pure interpretation of Islamic law have grown influential and popular especially in the recent past. The Salafi movement politically embodied in the Al-Nour Party is also striving for the purity of the original Islam. Quite commonly Salafists perceive the political system as secular and strive for the application of Sharia in the country's political and social life.

The change of power in Egypt in particular was the revolution of January 25, 2011 and the revolution which brought side the president Hosni Mubarak turning a new page in the history of Islamism in the region. Its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, secured the majority in the polls that were held after it in the parliament while Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood won the presidential election in 2012. But as it is well known, Morsi's presidency brought political instability and social discord into the Egyptian society. His government was trying to implement Islamic law and to strengthen its authority – the attempts resulted in large-scale demonstrations. Morsi was deposed by the military coup headed by general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, and since then, Egypt started suppressing Islamist parties.

Since Sisi came to power, the state has banned the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations and there is a politically repressive climate in Egypt, but there is still a demand for Islamist politics. Hence to most Egyptians, the Islamist movements and more so the Brotherhood provide a real viable option to the secular brackish political class. However, political discussions about the place of religion, especially Islam, in political leadership continue to the guide the politics of Egypt today with an Islamism still active in the country's social and political society.

2. ISLAMISM IN EGYPT

In its generic sense, Islamism is understood as political beliefs and orientation toward the establishment of the Islamic sociopolitical order. The environment of politics in Egypt has always witnessed Islamist movements as an important actor even though it came with pace being sensitive to the political climate at a given time. These include movements as conservatives who want to maintain the managerial form of Islam while extreme movements wish to install an Islamic state that follows the Sharia law.

Two most active groups that have dominated the Islamists in Egypt have been the Muslim brotherhood and the Salafi movement. The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamist organization which was established in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna considered one of the oldest organizations in the world. Its ideology integrates activism in the social sphere and religious conservatism on the one hand while engaging in vote seeking politics on the other. The other is Salafi movement which is a stricter form of Islamism that seeks to restore the traditions of Medina's first four generations of Muslims, the Salaf. Islamism in Egypt is a political and ideological perspective which aims to bring Islamic system into politics as well as in the society. Based on the search for answers to this question, it is possible to identify some key religious, social, political and historical factors that define the development of Islamism in Egypt as a branch of the more extensive process of Islamic revival at the turn of the twentieth century. The movement has been active in political change in the country, more so since 1970s to mid-1980s.

The history of Islam in Egypt starts from the period of Arab conquest of Egypt that occurred in the seventh century. Up to the recent decades, Egypt was an Islamic state, and Islamic Egypt is a constant part of its political and cultural experience. But in the 19th and early 20th century a new group of nationalist parties was formed under the influence from Western political and social thoughts came to existence in colonial period of British rule. Since the post-colonial period, Islamic political parties have arisen with the aim of restoring Egypt to Islamic rules and order in face of moral and political deterioration as well as intrusion from western world.

Organizational antecedents to modern Islamism in Egypt emerged in the form of Sayyid Qutb who wrote political commentaries in the 1940s-1950s that were to underpin Islamic radicalism. As a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb extended his idea to say that Islam is not only a religion, but a political authority over all facets of human activities. As for his ideas on what he called 'jahiliyya' meaning ignorance and the call for an Islamic state they would later find a home amongst the Islamist movements across the region.

An outstanding organisation created during the period of Islamist rise in Egypt can be considered Muslim Brotherhood. The brotherhood was formed in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, it aimed at creating an Islamic society by

realizing social, educational, and political changes. Despite the fact that it was not aggressive at first, the Brotherhood descended deeply into the realm of politics, especially after Egypt's liberation from the British rule in 1952. The group has faced different fates: it was banned and persecuted and at times repressed by the Egyptian state throughout the years, especially under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970) and the following rulers.

The Muslim Brotherhood was recognized as the leading Islamist group in Egypt. However, it carried out a vibrant operation in Egypt through charitable and social activities in spite of the times the group was arrested. Eventually, in the 1970s the Brotherhood emerged as a significant political organization even though its activity was prohibited. During the Arab Spring movement especially in Egypt early in 2011 to depose President Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood was recognized as one of the best structured and influential political formations. The political wing of it is called the Freedom and Justice Party which secured many seats in the parliamentary elections after the revolution to later produce the country's first democratically elected president in Mohamed Morsi in 2012.

However, rule of the Brotherhood only lasted a short period of time. In July 2013, the way was cleared for the present-day coup leader and incumbent President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to overthrow Morsi. This led to more than a thousand arrests of its members and the crackdown on Brotherhood supporters beginning in 2013 and the following year the Egyptian government designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

3. ISLAMISM BEYOND THE BROTHERHOOD

Although the Muslim Brotherhood is widely known as the largest and oldest Islamist group there are other Islamist movements in Egypt. These are; Wahabism or Salafism, an increasingly popular over the latter part of the twentieth century and the early twenty first strictly constructionist movement within Sunni Islam. The political parties include Al Nour Party which were active in the post-revolutionary period holding strict Shariete view of law against secular rule. Other groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS exist but with little or no support in some areas, whereas others have support in Sinai where Islamist rebels have been conducting an insurgency against the government.

4. THE PRELUDE TO THE ARAB SPRING IN EGYPT

The genesis of Islamist mobilisation in Egypt can be understood from socio-political situation in the country such as authoritarianism, economic stagnation and social injustice. Mubarak's regime in Egypt was secular but relied heavily on using Islamists as a way of checking other leftist and secular opposition actors throughout his rule from 1981-2011. But by the year 2000 dissatisfaction was galvanized by economic difficulties, political dictatorship, and no democratization.

The political of power in Egypt was dominated by the NDP and opposition, such as Islamists were systematically excluded. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood did establish itself as key political player in Egypt particularly after the parliamentary elections of 2005 in which it won a good number of seats even though it was an illegalised political party. In this regard, the Arab Spring precipitated increased organization since people in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East/North Africa were dissatisfied with the Mubarak regime. Social protest in Tunisia that saw the removal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011 made Egyptians protest. Although these protests were initially spearheaded by secular and youths' organization, Islamic organizations extended the protest in an attempt to achieve their political demands, especially Muslim brotherhood.

5. ISLAMIST INVOLVEMENT IN THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was due to people's dissatisfaction from President Mubarak's rule that has been in power for 30 years. While originally, it was for political change, soon people shifted goal posts and started demanding the president's resignation. Early on the MB and Salafists were reluctant to join the protests lest they be suppressed by the authorities and/or be sidelined to the secular and liberal opposition. Yet as the protest continued and the regime of Hosni Mubarak looked more and more exposed, these group started mobilizing their people.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which was in the opposition since the time of Mubarak, now had to make its decisions. It has accumulated its supporters over the years due to social services, religious education and standing against the secular state. However, it also fears getting too close to the secular and liberal members of the opposition which wished for increased democratic and liberalization. Despite their concern the Brotherhood entered the protest calling for the

removal of Mubarak and the transition to rule by a new political system. So, they did, but retreated from the more strident demands of some protestors while aligning themselves with the revolutionary struggle.

The Salafi movement though not so large in number was also infamous during the protest demanding religious authoritarianism. Alas, the Salafis were much less inclined toward cooperation with secularist movements, and were much more ready to establish an Islamic state based on shariah. Hence, their participation was not part of the drive to remove Mubarak's autocratic rule of the country but a quest to bring change of a different kind: the imposition of an Islamic agenda on Egypt's society. The brotherhood specifically was involved in the mobilization of protesters coordination of protests, and influencing the military once Mubarak was removed. They decided to participate in the revolution which enhanced their legitimacy and put them among the most influential political forces in Egypt after Mubarak's removal.

6. THE DEPTH OF ISLAMIC INFLUENCE IN THE EGYPT SINCE THE REVOLUTION

Egypt experienced changes after Mubarak stepped down from the presidency post. The military try to control the country by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces SCAF which claims to hand over the power to an elected civil authority. However, this military-led transition was not very long, or smooth; the SCAF was not willing to leave power to civilians. Furthermore, in this rather fluid environment, the Islamist movement, and in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, which possesses a solid organisational structure and enjoys wide support, turn out to be the best organised political force.

The presidential elections of 2012 saw the election of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood making this the first time in the history of Egypt that a president was elected democratically. After the victory of Morsi, it become clear that the political Islam is on the rise and Morsi's presidency gave a clear picture to the Egypt and the whole world. Nevertheless, his presidency brought new social divide in the Egyptian society than ever before. Although his hero to many people for adopting a new constitution and making efforts to Islamize the government; many secularists, liberals, some of the Islamists blamed his administration for becoming increasingly authoritarian and acting to consolidate power.

Thus, Morsi's actions – especially on the Sharia and the economic issues – were seen as detrimental by major groups of Egyptian population. The power struggle of the Brotherhood to impose its dominance into the political setting and thence subdue the other oppositional forces created reactions that smothered Morsi out of power through street demonstrations. But by June 2013 Egyptians in an uprising with the army's support dismissed Mr Morsi, thus bringing in a coup that ended the group's brief reign.

7. ISLAMIST MOBILIZATION UNDER SISI'S REGIME

The military overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi in summer 2013 as well as the campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood by the military led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is a major break for Islamist mobilization in Egypt. The military in the following year after the coup unleashed a crackdown on the political wing of the organization, incapacitating it. The Salah ad-Din was disbanded, thousands of Brotherhood members arrested and most of them experienced torture. The group was officially disbanded, and all of its political activity was crushed.

However, the Support of Islamist mobilization did not dissolve with the brutal crackdown. The Brotherhood therefore went to the hide and continued with protests but these became volatile and many were suppressed by the military. Al-Sai'fy, while generally in favour of Morsi's removal, also faced pressure from the military regime yet are less extreme and, unlike the two previous groups, are more enmeshed in the Egyptian political sphere, as the rise of other Islamic organizations such as ISIS expanded in the region. Some of the Islamist factions involved in operations and had links with militant groups participated in violent struggles against the state resulting to emergence of extremism in the Middle East. At the same time, other people tried to regain their position through a participatory struggle and increasing the supply of social services in districts which the state ignored.

8. CONCLUSION

Islamism versus secularism remains a key factor in Egypt's contemporary political development process and future. This paper argues that the process of Islamist mobilization in Egypt during the Arab Spring was conditioned by the political opportunity, the organizational assets and the ideology. The 2011 revolution of Egypt actually gave an opportunity for the Islamist groups to fight against the oppressive secular Mubarak regime, at the same time it also unveiled the splits within the Islamist movement. Although MB was able to take advantage more of the revolution and even came to power, its rule was short lived and the return of the military with Sisi was a major setback for political Islam in Egypt.

However, this has been demonstrated in more detail by the events of the Arab Spring and the subsequent crackdown, when Islamist movements proved capable of adapting to repression. Political, social and violent activism all showed Islamist's ability to change the way they act based off of political events happening in Egypt. The Egyptian experience of Islamist mobilization is, therefore, a story of mobilization that has failed but has also persisted pointing to the more intricate interplay of religion and politics as well as power in the Arab region.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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