

THE ISLAMISTS IN THE REALM OF THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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As predicted right before Mubarak's fall, the Islamists have widely benefited from the power vacuum in Egypt. Despite the different position they have taken regarding the Egyptian revolution, they were the ultimate winners of all elections held till now. They also altered the public debate focusing on the identity of the state rather than on the reforms that should be introduced to build a new democracy. They were busy pursuing their potential share of power through building an alliance with the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) and distancing themselves from the revolutionary movement. By doing so, they have given the old despotic regime a precious chance to maintain its presence and launch a counter-revolution to recapture its loss. Nevertheless, the Islamists in Egypt should be carefully differentiated since they are neither adopting the same discourse nor allied over the same policy options.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the oldest political Islamic movement in Egypt, has had extensive experience in elections since 1984 and a rigid organizational body which is highly effective in mobilization. The MB published several documents in 1996 and 2004 accepting democracy, citizenship and civil state values. However, their last platform published in 2007 has raised many controversies. That document has reflected a deep conflict within the MB, between a reformist trend aiming to evolve the MB's discourse and attitude to fully embrace democracy and a conservative trend preferring to preserve the MB's traditional discourse and elitist internal management.¹ Hence, the 2007 platform was released in different versions but the official version was the most conservative, depriving women and non-Muslims from running for the presidency. After the revolution, most of the reformist leaders and youth have left or were expelled from the Brotherhood, and the conservative wing has fully controlled both the Brotherhood and the newly-founded Freedom and Justice Party (FJP).

Although the FJP's platform does not bear the same restrictions on citizenship, its political attitude does not show a real commitment to the values cited in the new platform. The MB was clever enough to issue several promises during the revolution to appease Egyptians' worries about the future, but it was not keen on keeping them. The MB announced in February 2011 that it will run for only 40% of the parliament's seats and will not present a presidential candidate. The Brotherhood has practically broken this promise by running for more than 70% of the lower chamber of parliament and getting 47% of the seats, and running for 96% of the higher chamber and getting 58% of the seats. Moreover, it is still mixing political with religious activism, excessively employing religious arguments in political discourse. It keeps attacking its opponents on religious grounds, practicing a hegemonic attitude towards its political opponents and partners as well, while introducing a softer approach when it comes to negotiating with the SCAF, the real power holder in Egypt today. And rather than consolidating its internal democracy, modernizing its structure and announcing its financial status, the MB was busy with punishing and expelling its reformist members. The Brotherhood has fired a large number of its members for disobedience, including Abdel-Moneim Abul-Fotouh, a reformist leader who had decided to run for the presidency, alongside all the MB youth who supported his candidacy.

1. Hossam Tamam, "The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Regime: The Test of Parliamentary Elections as a Condition for Political Transition", *The Arab Reform Brief*, March 2010.

On the other hand, the Salafi movements, which were prohibiting political activism, have found in politics a good playground to exploit their adherents after Mubarak's fall. Fragmented in separated networks, they have formed three political parties, but the Al-Nour Party seems to be the most organized and best financed amongst them. After attacking for decades the notions of democracy, human rights and institutional diversity for being imported from western thought, they have integrated them into the Al-Nour Party's platform, side by side with Islamic Shariah. But, again, the real commitment to these values is not well digested by the party's leaders and masses. Al-Nour's parliamentary members have made controversial statements insulting political figures, misleading their masses about different events and suggesting non-democratic policy options. Nevertheless, the official party spokesman was always keen to clarify the real position of Al-Nour and to apologize on behalf of its MPs.

Being new in the field with no previous experience to follow, the Salafis were kind of impressed by the organizational ability of the MB and decided to follow their position and imitate their attitude. But after the referendum results showing that the Yes camp that was interpreted to be Islamist won 77%, the Salafis started to think that their voting machine could successfully compete with the MB rather than cooperating with or following them. They refused to ally with them in parliamentary elections, opposed their candidates in many places and won 24% of the lower chamber and 31% of the higher chamber of the parliament. However, when the parliamentary sessions began, given their lack of experience the Salafis went back to following the FJP members.

According to the Survey of Experts and Actors on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership 2011, a seemingly pessimistic Czech academic argued that the Islamists would not necessarily follow democratic rules, recalling that Hitler gained power through fair elections.² However, a Tunisian academic is certain that Islamist rule will lead to despotism rather than democracy.³ A Maltese official agrees implicitly with this view, arguing that a major paradigmatic shift will definitely happen but the direction of this change cannot be predicted.⁴ This perspective supposes that democracy is not culturally entrenched in the region, as stated by a Jordanian business actor, hence a deep change in terms of education and culture is a precondition for democratic sustainability in the region. Therefore, the first regime to be established in a country will have a direct impact on the upcoming steps of democratic consolidation in that country, as stated by an Egyptian NGO activist. But since the Islamists, whose intentions regarding democracy are not clear, have accessed power after the first fair elections, the future of democracy in these countries is also not clear.

During the first few sessions, the Islamist parliamentary majority agreed on accrediting the government appointed by the SCAF, containing the criticism addressed by the liberals and leftists to the SCAF and reorienting the agenda to be merely Islamized rather than reformist. In the meantime, the Islamist majority was severely attacked by public opinion for dismissing the revolutionary demands, allying with the SCAF and giving a political cover to an inefficient government. Thus, in a way to repair their popularity, they entered into a clash with the SCAF over the government, requesting its dismissal.

But even during their short clash with the SCAF, the Islamists led by the MB continued their exclusionary attitude regarding the Constituent Assembly formation and wasted a chance to rebuild a national consensus with the liberal and revolutionary parties. By insisting on dominating the Constituent Assembly, they caused the withdrawal of the representatives of the liberals, leftists, Al-Azhar, churches and constitutional court. But only when a judicial appeal forced them to form a new Constituent Assembly based on fair criteria and balanced representation, have they called for national consensus.

2. Survey of Experts and Actors on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership 2011, Q11, row 17.

3. Ibid, row 79.

4. Ibid, row 15.

Unlike the referendum and the legislative elections, the Islamists are divided on the eve of the presidential elections. After their clash with the SCAF, the MB broke another promise and presented a presidential candidate. In all cases, the Brotherhood could not stand to be deeply divided if its masses were attracted to its defected reformist leader Abul-Fotouh, or to the independent Salafi candidate Abu-Ismaïl, who was later disqualified. The Muslim Brotherhood presented two candidates, El-Shater and Morsy, in case one of them was disqualified, in order to guarantee themselves a place at the top of the new system and not just a majority in parliament. But contrary to predictions, the Al-Nour Party decided to challenge the hegemonic tendency of the MB and supported Abul-Fotouh, rather than Morsy, who survived the disqualification process. Although it was always introducing religious arguments to justify political choices, the Al-Nour Party argued on a rational basis when choosing Abul-Fotouh. Reacting to that, the MB's leadership has severely criticized the Salafi choice, accusing them of supporting an "insufficiently" Islamist candidate. This pushed Abul-Fotouh to issue some conservative statements to address the Salafi masses, thereby losing some of his popularity among liberals and leftists. After he was considered as a reformist figure within the Islamist bloc, trying to present a collective project supported by all tendencies on the political sphere, Abul-Fotouh's real position was questioned. Thus, despite being a minority, the Salafis could eventually alter the political discourse of other moderate Islamists, especially in an electoral context.

The role of political Islam is perceived as decisive in the democratization process, since it is a major factor in undermining it or guaranteeing its success. One Moroccan academic predicts that political Islam's role will be crucial in the next five to ten years and then it will decline,⁵ while others tend to make a distinction between moderates who are ready to build and integrate into a democratic system and radicals who would eventually undermine this system. The Islamist identity could be generally growing, as stated by a French official,⁶ but political Islam is not a coherent phenomenon that could be treated as a whole. Hence, only the moderate wing will survive⁷ or, more precisely, the realpolitik will turn the Islamists into pragmatic politicians.⁸ Thus, the daily interests and needs of the people will play the greater role.⁹ In this regard, the Turkish model is quite attractive to the Arab Islamists, as an Algerian media actor predicted.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the divide amongst Islamists has lightened the polarization over identity and both the MB and Salafis have shown more flexibility and rationality than they did at the beginning of the process. However, the real attitude and conviction of both trends of political Islam still need to be examined through the drafting of the constitution and the establishment of the new political system. In the meantime, the competition between them could be exploited to consolidate democracy. But despite the importance of the economic factor in a successful transition, both trends are taking this issue lightly and have not yet shown their ability to face it.

A real challenge for democracy in Egypt, as stated by a Moroccan official,¹¹ is being smashed between the iron fist of military rule and the Islamists' hegemony in political institutions. Being in alliance since Mubarak's ousting has not prevented the clash between the two parties, which started in late March 2012 and shadowed the presidential elections. Major topics of disputes were the dissolution of parliament right before the win by the MB's presidential candidate Mohamed Morsy and the issuing of a restrictive constitutional declaration that removed many of the presidential prerogatives of the SCAF. Being deprived of their parliamentary majority and having decreased authorities for the presidency, the Islamists could not decide on the future of Egypt without the consent of the military, whose role in politics would continue after the transfer

5. Survey of Experts and Actors on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership 2011, Q12, row 35.

6. Ibid, row 57.

7. Ibid, row 88.

8. Ibid, row 62.

9. Ibid, row 113.

10. Ibid, row 66.

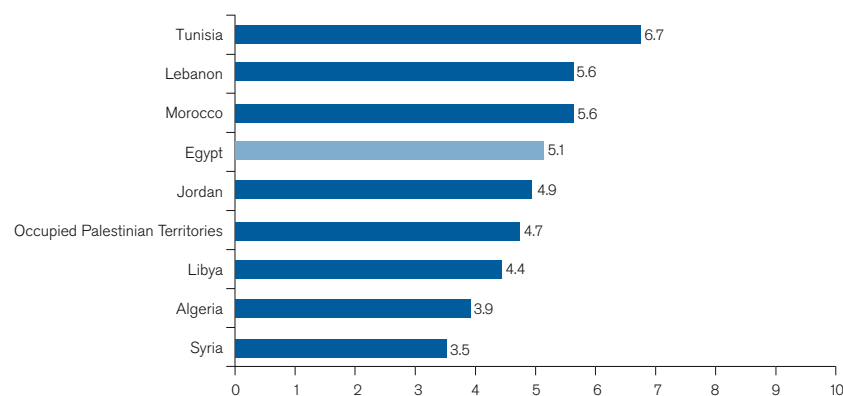
11. Survey of Experts and Actors on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership 2011, Q11, row 5.

of power to civilian authorities. The military plays a dual role in facing the hegemonic tendency of Islamists, which is positive, but at the same time it is freezing the will of the first freely-elected authority. Therefore, the delicate balance between these two powers could eventually lead to a sustainable democracy through a long track of altered competitive and cooperative relations. In the meantime, the secular political forces need to expand their popular roots within the society, contribute to the cultural change and act as a strong competitor that urges the Islamists to evolve or find their popularity eroded.

Accordingly, a sustainable democracy is not possible in the short term but has more chance in the long term. An Algerian academic is seemingly very convinced that the ultimate destination for the region is democracy since the absence of democracy was the main reason for this change to occur. According to a Turkish academic, the consolidation of democracy is a long process that engages free elections, rule of law, checks and balances, educational reform, secular laws, freedom of expression and women's rights.¹² Such a process typically needs strong institutions to implement it, and Egypt is amongst those countries with a real chance to succeed in this process, as a Moroccan academic stated.¹³ A French official suggests that Egypt's chance to consolidate democracy is not affected by the fact of being governed by Islamists. An Algerian academic agrees with this opinion by stating that Egypt is culturally prepared to host a real democracy,¹⁴ while others place Egypt fourth, after Tunisia, Morocco and Lebanon, as major countries likely to achieve sustainable democracies.¹⁵

Graph 1: Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy in the following countries

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very improbable and 10 for very probable)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

12. Ibid, row 23.

13. Ibid, row 58.

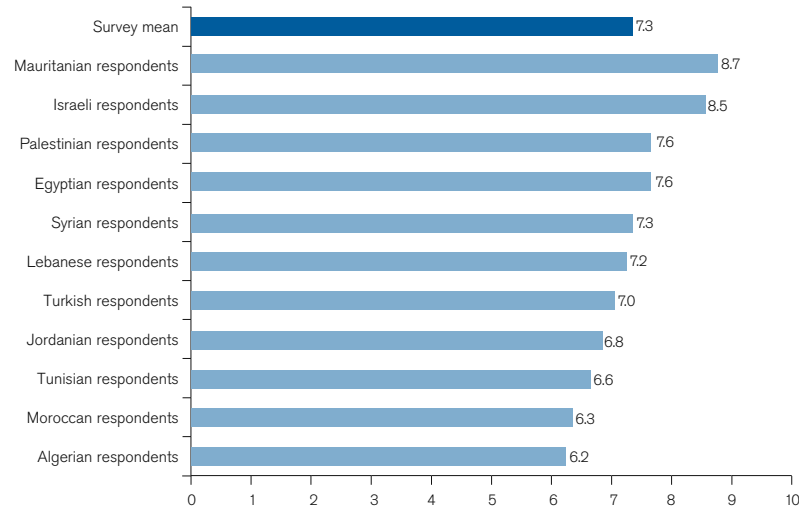
14. Ibid, row 27.

15. Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy, on a scale of 0-10, Egypt received 5.09.

This ranking seems quiet logical, since the Tunisian and Moroccan Islamists are more respectful of democratic rules than their Egyptian fellows. Having attained power before the Egyptian Islamists, the Tunisian and Moroccan experience of Islamist governments would have a great impact on the Egyptian experience.

Graph 2: Role of political Islam in the future Mediterranean landscape

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for negligible role and 10 for key role)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey