



EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND POLITICAL POWER: WOULD DEMOCRACY SURVIVE?

By Magdi Khalil*

This article discusses the debate over whether or not the Muslim Brotherhood would be moderated by sharing or achieving power. The author suggests a number of reasons to doubt that this would be the case.

One of the key questions for Egypt's future is whether the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist group that gained about 20 percent of the seats in the relatively fairer elections held in late 2005, is going to be a part of a democratic order or will only use any such opportunities to pursue a more radical agenda. Internationally, one of the most reputable reform leaders, Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, has insisted that the Brotherhood is ready to play a democratic role. For the last twenty-five years, he has been a tireless human rights activist, a founding member of the Arab Organization for Human rights (AOHR), and was even thrown into prison because of his beliefs. He dedicated himself to the cause of minorities, sponsoring a conference entitled, "Sects, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups in the Arab World" in 1994, and also authored a book of the same title.¹ Dr. Ibrahim's credentials are superb, but is he right about the Muslim Brotherhood?

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the international community has been greatly concerned with the situation in the Arab world, including issues of religious reform and the prospect of Islamists sharing political power. These issues have been discussed far

and wide, in newspapers, research centers, and decision-making institutions. It is, however, much easier for people to agree on the need for democracy and reform than it is to reach any common conclusion about the Islamist question. For offering Islamist groups a share in power or championing elections in situations where they might become strong forces or even governing ones is understandably a thorny topic that sparks extensive and heated debates.

Nor are matters resolved by calling on the Turkish or other models. In Turkey, an Islamic--though some say Islamist--party rules the country and, so far at least, appears to respect democratic norms. One can also talk of Islamist involvement in electoral politics in countries like Indonesia, Morocco, or Jordan. On the other hand though, it is possible to cite Islamist takeovers and extremism in Iran, Afghanistan, or Sudan. Even U.S. officials have received enthusiastically Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, who heads an Islamic party as well as his country, and spoken of the value of having the Turkish model taken up in the Arab world.

Not even all Arab reformers agree on these matters. Some fear that the prospect of an elected Islamist regime could set off a military coup, as in Algeria, or replace the traditional religious hierarchy with a more radical one. They might even side with the current regime to prevent an even worse alternative from gaining power. Others call for an unrestricted right of political participation, arguing that the Islamists will either be defeated, outmaneuvered, split, subordinated, or forced to become more moderate.

In an article in *al-Hayat*, October 7, 2004, for example, entitled, "Reclaiming Democracy...the Participation of Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian Political Life," Dr. Ibrahim called for the Muslim Brotherhood to be allowed to share in political power.² My name was mentioned among those dismayed by this prospect. The basis of this concern is a fear--which which Dr. Ibrahim admits is well founded--that without adequate safeguards, the Islamists would use the democratic system to further their own purposes. When they no longer need democracy, this argument runs, they will jettison it. The author admits that he himself shares such concerns.

Dr. Ibrahim and the author of this article agree that all citizens should be able to enjoy the right of political participation, engage in political activities, and hold all types of political posts, including the presidency. We are also in agreement that adequate safeguards should be put in place to prevent the manipulation and abuse of the democratic system.

In this regard, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a particularly important factor to consider. Not only does it now represent the main opposition body in Egypt, but given Egypt's importance and the role of the Brotherhood in other countries, what happens in Egypt could set a precedent that would prevail throughout the region on the issue of the integration of Islamists into political life.

Two important questions come to mind in this regard. First, what is the basis for this sudden optimistic call for the Brotherhood's incorporation into a democratic system as a sincere participant? In other words, did the Muslim Brotherhood have a recent change of heart that justifies such confidence? Second, what type of measures should be implemented to safeguard the political and institutional system in case our confidence proves later to have been misplaced?

In response to the first question, there have been no substantial shifts in the attitudes and agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood and certainly nothing that could justify this surge of optimism. There have been only marginal changes that have not touched on the main vision of the Muslim Brotherhood, namely to establish an Islamist state.

Putting aside the long history of that movement, let us only go back to 1984 when the Brotherhood allied itself with the al-Wafd party. This allowed a partial participation, including having members in parliament and a disturbing measure of control over important segments of the Egyptian civil society, such as professional associations for example. Yet 16 years after beginning its electoral and parliamentary role--albeit

indirectly--the Muslim Brotherhood issued a March 2004 political platform which was in fact a proposal for an Islamist state. According to this initiative: "Our mission is to implement a comprehensive reform in order to uphold God's law in secular as well as religious matters....Our only hope, if we wish to achieve any type of progress, is to adhere to our religion, as we used to, and to apply the Shari'a (Islamic law)."³

It states that the Brotherhood's "mission is to build a Muslim individual, a Muslim family and an Islamic rule to lead other Islamic states." How would this Islamic identity affect the media, economy, politics, education, social welfare, women's issues, and culture? The Muslim Brotherhood elaborates on these issues in its initiative:

- "The Media should be cleansed of anything that disagrees with the decrees of Islam."
- "We believe in an economic system that is derived from Islam."
- "The state should have a democratic system compatible with Islam."
- It proposed, "To increase the number of Kuttab [a rudimentary religious school] and nurseries, and the focus of education should be on learning the Quran by heart".
- "The Zakah [alms] institutions should be in charge of distributing wealth and income."
- "Women should only hold the kind of posts that would preserve their virtue."
- "Our culture has to be derived from Islamic sources.....There should be a ban on improper and offensive series and television programs."

The Muslim Brotherhood took obvious pride in their reform initiative, which turned out to be no more than a comprehensive project for an Islamist Fascist state. Is this project any different from Iran's version of democracy recently labeled "The Islamic democracy"?

A similar pattern can be identified upon examining the parliamentary inquiries that have been presented by Muslim Brotherhood members from 1984 to the present day. They have mostly targeted general freedoms--pursuing writers and creative thinkers, haunting young singers, requesting that kissing scenes be banned from movies, and pressuring the religious institutions such as al-Azhar to take a tougher line. In contrast to their fixation on cultural controls, these representatives of the Brotherhood have shown no interest in issues or problems related to the development and progress of the nation they were entrusted to represent.

A third way to measure the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude toward democracy is to examine the alarming results of its ironclad control on a number of Egyptian organizations. Within these groups, it has a record of corruption, fanaticism, and promoting conflict. The major concern of the Muslim Brotherhood was to raise funds or use those belonging to these institutions in order to support Islamists all over the world, from Chechnya to Afghanistan and Bosnia. Terrorist groups have used these same funds to threaten Egypt's national security, its Christian citizens, and foreign guests--giving a small, horrendous taste of what is to come should they gain power.

Still a fourth proof is to look at the internal structure of the Muslim Brotherhood movement which pays no heed to democracy.

The organization's decisions and processes are shrouded in mystery and secrecy, with no visible shred of tolerance, diversity, or transparency.

Finally, in its political alliances, the Brotherhood has abused, disregarded, and tried to take over such partners as the Wassat and Wafd parties. This is a bad precedent for how it might treat coalition partners, using techniques like Communist parties have done to weaken, oust, and repress them.

Some observers point to the Muslim Brotherhood's relative lack of direct involvement in terrorist acts within Egypt. However, it has never condemned--verbally or otherwise--the barbaric terrorist attacks that have plagued the whole world, nor was there any use made of funds to help those who fell victim to the horrific violence of radical Islamist groups within the country. On the contrary, the majority of Muslim Brotherhood's statements are in support of Islamism and extremism, proclaiming that their objective is "mastering the world with Islam." In short, why would this group support a democratic, non-Islamist regime within Egypt when it so passionately advocates this system everywhere else?: "The application of Shari'a in Sudan was truly an act inspired by God. I believe that Sudan is now experiencing an unprecedented beatific and pure phase thanks to the application of Shari'a that delivered the country from the plague of secular law." [The late Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali].⁴

Consider the following statements:

- "[Sudanese dictator Jaafar] Nemer has achieved our hopes, the hopes of

Muslims and Sudan's hope to apply the Shari'a. [The late Sheikh Salah Abu Ismail].⁵

- "The Sudanese president should not give way to those who criticize the application of Shari'a; they should be subdued and given no opportunity to proceed with their foolishness under the pretext of freedom of opinion or speech". [The Muslim Brotherhood's late spiritual guide, Omar al-Telmesani].⁶
- Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Muslim Brotherhood spiritual advisor, liked to call Afghanistan "an Islamic Emirate." Upon visiting Afghanistan, he was enthusiastic about this regime.

The declarations of the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders all revolve around the establishment of an Islamist state, Muslim unity, and the establishment of a multinational Islamist Caliphate. As far as one can tell, they have no national vision or patriotic loyalty to Egypt. To quote Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali, "A Muslim's homeland is his faith, a Muslim's government is the Shari'a, and the Muslim's homeland and those who live in it may all be sacrificed for the sake of Islam."⁷

In an interview with the magazine Al-Sharq Alawsaat, the Brotherhood's former leader and guide Mamoun al-Hudeibi explained that the Muslim Brotherhood's purpose is to establish Islamic unity and an Islamic Caliphate similar to that which prevailed in the seventh century.⁸ Does

history show that this type of goal is in the interests of Egyptians and would take the form of democracy, where voters could put such a system out of office when they choose to do so?

It is not difficult to question the value of such a state. Of the four caliphs who ruled during that period, three were murdered and all four were tortured. That era and the period which followed were full of bloody incidents and wars, not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also among Muslims themselves. Bitter conflicts arose, such as the conflict between the Amawyeen and Hashemeyeen, vicious disputes over power, the attack on al-Hussein's grave, the Khawareg sect's revolt, and the dreadful acts of the Hashasheen.

Nor was virtue enthroned under the latter caliphate. In states ruled by caliphs there was heavy drinking and the indulging in all sorts of immoral practices and perversions. Brothels and gambling houses abounded in Baghdad, while Mecca was filled with the voices of male and female singers and an obscene, corrupted entourage. The caliph al-Rashid owned one thousand female slaves, while al-Metwakel owned more than four thousand, since slaves were preferred over free women. Shockingly, as shown in Said al-Ashmawi's book, *The Islamic Caliphate*, the caliphs publicly committed acts of depravity and infidelity.⁹ One has to wonder as to why the Muslim Brotherhood wishes so desperately to revive such an age.

The real question is what evidence exists to give any reason to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood would not merely make good use of what democracy has to offer and later decide that it has outlived its usefulness? Would they hesitate to sacrifice

democracy if it no longer served their purposes or complied with their agenda? The conclusion is decided by the declarations of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders themselves. To quote former Supreme Guide Mustafa Mashur, as cited by Refaat al-Said in *Against Illumination*, "We accept the concept of pluralism for the time being; however, when we will have Islamic rule we might then reject this concept or accept it."¹⁰

In his article, Dr. Ibrahim mentioned Muslim countries that, from his perspective, have successfully applied democratic practices. Nonetheless, where this has included letting Islamists share political power, these countries have only managed to reach a temporary truce. Even so, the dependence on Islamist parties led to a failure to foster social progress. Periods of renewal in Muslim countries were only possible when the civil society forged close ties with the government and when the state rejected isolation in favor of constructive interaction with other societies and with Western civilization.

In countries like Egypt where there is a non-Muslim minority, an Islamist state becomes particularly problematic. The Coptic community rejects such a system. It believes that citizenship rights and duties should be formulated on a civil, national, and institutional basis rather than a religious one, thus placing national identity high above religious identity.

If this analysis seems pessimistic, such concerns are justified by the great risks entailed in trusting Islamist groups. Reality may prove to be worse. Egyptians must ensure that in our understandable eagerness to achieve the long-desired dream of

democracy, one does not accidentally cause irrevocable damage to our society.

Accordingly, then, what types of "safety measures" should be devised to protect a political system in which Islamists might come to power by legitimate democratic means, either in whole or in part? Would local measures be sufficient or is a combination of local and international safeguards required? How can they then be deterred from carrying out their proclaimed objectives at the expense of civil society and democracy? In what way can Islamist parties be made into Islamic parties parallel to the Christian Democratic ones which have played such an important part in modern European politics?

An immediate point that must be made is that the Turkish experience does not provide a viable recipe for the Arab world. Turkey's democratic achievements are the product of a unique set of circumstances, including the development and preservation of its civil society for the last 75 years, a strong focus on secular values, and a close interaction with its European neighbors. The secular nature of Turkish society is safeguarded by its armed forces, laws, constitution, and a long history of democratic practices.

In fact, the lesson to be learned from the Turkish experience is that the development of a secular society is a necessary prelude to democratization. In a book published in 2003, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Fareed Zakaria stated that the much-desired democracy is not about the transfer of power from the hands of militaries to the hands of a religious rabble

hiding behind fake religious masks; but rather the transfer of power into the hands of a sound civil society capable of choosing leaders who believe in power circulation, freedom, and the value of human life.¹¹

Evidently, democracy--in the true sense of the word--can never be attained without granting freedoms first. It is seriously misleading to define democracy as nothing more than ballots and polls. Democracy has a large set of fundamental values and practices that include strong institutions, political awareness, respect of individual choices, the practice of citizenship and political rights, a total separation of the three branches of government, and an effective enforcement of the rule of the law.

The Muslim Brotherhood loudly advocates free elections. However, a free democratic society is based on a great deal more than elections. Honest and free elections are considered just one pillar among a set of pillars that uphold the foundations of a democratic state:

- A complete separation between state and religion; all constitutional articles that indicate the state's official religion or refer to the Islamic Shari'a should, therefore, be annulled.
- Religious freedom, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Everyone has the right to freedom of religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, (or to have none) and the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or

belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Religious freedom should be protected by constitution and laws.¹²

- Political rights, including citizenship rights for non-Muslims and women. These rights should not be based on, or restricted by, religious creed. They should be based on the constitution and civil laws that opt for complete equality between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims. The international treaties and agreements that support these rights should be accepted without reservations. A conditional acceptance based on the compatibility with Shari'a is against the essence of these rights, as it promotes discrimination and denies equality.
- To grant and respect personal freedom. A person is not required to give account of his individual choices or actions unless they prove harmful to others. From a religious perspective, he will be required to give account of his actions on judgment day, and that matter is strictly a personal matter that concerns no one but the individual and God Almighty.
- A national identity for the state as opposed to a religious identity. In that context, the focus on Islamic unity or an Islamic caliph is not acceptable as it goes against the notion of a national state and carries the dire prospect of a religious fascist rule.
- Freedom of expression in all its forms, including the right to publish newspapers and establish broadcasting media facilities with no restrictions apart from those applied in other democratic states.
- To abide by the international agreements and treaties approved by Egypt in the past, including the peace treaty with Israel without religious or non-religious reservations, and to uphold the commitment to the peace process.
- To accept and respect the values of modernity adopted by the Western societies: individuality, privacy, private property, free economy, creative interaction with other societies, and the complete separation between the branches of government. These values stand against the submissive "flock behavior" and similar crippling social phenomena that crush individual vision and expression.
- To adopt the language of a civil state as opposed to the religious fascist terminology that reinforces tyranny and regression. The modern concept of democracy is, for example, conspicuously different from the religious concept of "Shura" (consultative decision-making). The following expressions are frequently used by Islamists: "major governance"; "minor governance"; "the nation's constants"; "the nation's identity"; "the nation's enemies"; "they (e.g., the Christians) have the same rights and duties as we do"; "land of war" and "land of peace"; the "unbelievers" or "infidels"; "Jihad"

(holy war); "cultural invasion"; "hesba" (informal police in a neighborhood). Some of these expressions are offensive and reflect a high level of intolerance and bigotry, and all of them are incompatible with the spirit of democracy and the foundations of a modern state.

- To endorse the elements of the civil society in the different aspects of life and curb the religious tone, speech, and expressions that presently taint the media, culture, and laws.

If we opt for religious movements to become part of the democratic process, they should first proclaim their full acceptance and abidance with the terms of civil society. Additionally, effective local and international safeguards should be set in place in order to protect the society against a violation of these rights.

A most effective local safeguard would be the formulation of a new social contract that endorses the values of coexistence, civil society, democracy, and a constitution that is consistent with those values. Such a contract cannot be in effect unless it is approved by the entire society, including political powers from the right and left wings, civil society organizations, political parties, religious leaders, and prominent public figures. The High Constitutional Court would act as a supervisor to deal with possible violations and, under its guidance, the police and armed forces would act as guardians and protectors of the contract. The entire political process, including the elections, should be under the

authority of an empowered and totally independent judiciary, without the interference of the executive authority or religious institutions.

The involvement of the international community in monitoring this social contract would further safeguard the democratic system. International foundations and civil society organizations should be involved in monitoring elections, the status of women and minorities, and democratic development. In fact, the international community should keep a close watch on the local situation if the Islamists are allowed to take part in ruling their countries. If our worst fears come true, a request for international interference--in a military or non-military capacity--should not be deemed illegitimate.

It seems that the Western world, as eager as it is to reduce violence in the Muslim states, has opted for the Islamists to take part in ruling these countries. However, the citizens of these countries have no desire to suffer unduly for the sake of a "trial and error" experiment, because in that case the error would prove fatal.

To conclude, this entire analysis is based on two assumptions: The first is that it is almost impossible to assume that Islamist parties would accept the values of a democratic and liberal society since those are, in fact, in total contradiction with their own proclaimed values. That would be like joining two opposites, claiming that there is such a thing as "a legal murder" or a "wise fool." This erroneous assumption could best be described as an oxymoron because it is not possible for the Islamists to adopt those

values and retain their identity as Islamists, they would otherwise be liberals.

Secondly, and equally unlikely, is the assumption that the Egyptian armed forces would be amenable to the role of guardians of civil society, democracy, and secularism as is the case in Turkey. As a matter of fact, the armed forces believe they have "inherited" Egypt since the revolution of 1952 and act as legitimate owners rather than guardians. They have no quarrel with the Islamists--quite the opposite in some cases--however, this is a power conflict and not an ideological one. The armed forces will not concede power, and would wage war on any potential competitors.

Obviously, such a serious--and potentially lethal--issue merits the most careful consideration and study. Countries in the Middle East, and especially Egypt, have gone through so many decades of tragedy that adding new suffering and setting back the cause of progress and a better life would be a terrible mistake and would lead to a dreadful future for all.

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NOTES

¹ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Sects, Ethnicity, and Minority Groups in the Arab World*. (In Arabic), (Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1994).

² Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Reclaiming Democracy...the Participation of Muslim

Brotherhood in Egyptian Political Life," *al-Hayat*, October 7, 2004.

³ The Muslim Brotherhood Initiative for Reform, Declared in Syndicate of Journalists, March 2004.

⁴ Farag Fouda, *Before Collapse*, (Cairo: 1985).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Magdi Khalil, *Diaspora Copts* (Cairo, 1999).

⁸ Al-Sharq Alawsat, August 9, 2002.

⁹ Muhammad Said al-Ashmawi, *al-Khilafah al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Caliphate)* (Cairo: Dar Sina, 1990).

¹⁰ Refaat al-Said, *Against Illumination* (Cairo: 1996).

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

¹² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm>.