Report

The Islamist Movement and Questions on the 'mehna' (ordeal)

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Introduction

This paper assumes that the hypotheses predicting the end of political Islam, and describing recent events in Egypt as an early and rapid failure of the Islamist movements fall within a serious methodological dilemma. Following the consequences and repercussions of the Egyptian experience, these hypotheses attempt to predict the same fate for various such movements, despite the vast differences in the experiences of these movements and in their stance towards their respective governments.

In the wake of the 30 June 2013 demonstrations against President Mohammed Mursi, and his ouster by the army in the 3 July coup, Arab and Egyptian analyses and opinions quickly concluded with predictions about the fall of political Islam, and described what happened as an early and rapid failure of political Islamist movements in power. (1)

This argument falls into a major methodological problem as it makes generalisations, without established grounds or inductive study that provides indicators to support such results. More importantly, they reveal a genuine desire to throw the various political Islamist experiences into one basket, and to predict a common fate for all of them following the consequences and repercussions of the Egyptian experience. This despite the wide variety in the experiences of these movements in their stance towards the authorities. Even within a single school of thought, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), there are multiple and diversified formations with different inputs and results.

2

Moreover, Islamists survived for decades under security and military pressure, but did not 'vanish', even under the toughest political and security conditions. On the contrary, they returned powerfully when given the chance, as in the case of Libya and Tunisia.

It must be remembered that the Arab world is undergoing a foggy transition that has not yet matured, and whose results are still unclear. It is open to various changes, possibilities and scenarios where a set of domestic, regional and international elements are intertwined. It is not necessary for the political and people's ups and downs to be consolidated among such movements as long as they differ in their pragmatic political approaches and in their understanding of the nature of the surrounding political circumstances. This is the main argument of this paper in its discussion of the supposed collapse of the project of political Islam in general, in its discussion of the theory that the Islamic movement is once again being transformed in the direction of radicalism, extremism and violence, and in its interrogation of other early conclusions emanating from the outcomes of the Egyptian experience.

A series of questions arise explicitly about these developments and transformations, as well as a number of implicit questions in the various theories regarding repercussions of the Egyptian case on Islamist movements in the Arab World. In the aftermath of the events in Egypt, will the MB maintain and affirm its commitment to democracy and peacefulness, or will it resort to violence or, perhaps, seclusion and radical thinking? After Egypt, if the most prominent experiments of Islamists in power – in Tunisia and Morocco – are defeated, will these movements respond in the same way as the MB in Egypt, or will they respond in varying, contextual ways?

This paper discusses these arguments by reviewing the changes impacting the possible options for the MB, and the political scenarios for the future of the MB in Egypt. It then examines the impact of different factors on other Islamist experiences – whether on the level of direct repercussions, or in terms of adaptations expected in the near future.

Reminiscence of Nasserism

The days that followed the 3 July coup witnessed sit-ins, protests and large demonstrations, supporting the Islamists, in Egypt's squares and streets. These events strengthened the theories of those researchers of Islamist groups who had refused to accept the argument that political Islam was collapsing. They, instead, argued that the Islamists will return, based on an understanding of what they called the 'ordeal' in the Egyptian Islamist movement. This referred to infamous phase when members of the Egyptian MB had undergone various forms of torture, arrests, executions and bans under

the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The MB lived with the consequences and outcomes of this phase for many decades, surviving under surveillance, pressure, threats, trials and imprisonment. (2)

During the first phase of the ordeal, after the clash with the Egyptian army in 1954, the political and theological thought of MB leader Sayyid Qutb stood out and dominated within the ideology of the MB; this thought was later adopted by the jihadist and radical Islamist movements. The political manifestation of Qutb's ideology was best laid out in his book Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones), which is more or less a manifesto for 'radical Islam'. In Ma'alim, Qutb discussed the notion of 'bargaining' with existing regimes, and argued for refusing the 'logic of striking deals', 'midway solutions', and compromise over the establishment of an Islamic State. (3)

After the 3 July coup, MB members and supporters reminisced heavily about Qutb on social media. It became clear that they found solace in what he had written nearly half a century ago as they attempted to interpret what happened to the MB in the current conjuncture, including the return to suffering under detention, murder, imprisonment, accusations and harassment. It was as if the period of the presidency of Mohammed Mursi and their many victories in parliamentary and presidential elections had been only a short daydream, after which the MB returned to the same, tired, old story – the mehna or ordeal. Yet, some with close ties to the movement believe that the suffering the movement underwent in a few weeks since the beginning of July 2013 was tougher and more severe than their suffering of over a decade and a half during Abdel Nasser's rule, and all their suffering during the Sadat and Hosni Mubarak eras.

There are two readings that can explain MB members' summoning of the thought of Qutb in the current circumstances.

The first reading is that these young people in the MB found a satisfactory and convincing interpretation in the writings of Qutb for what was currently happening. One of their young leaders wondered, 'What do they want from the Muslim Brotherhood? The MB made great ideological compromises; they gave up the notion of Islamic state, totally and finally accepted the results of the ballot, and tried to build alliances during their governance, but they were met with rejection from other political forces.' (4) This young man continues his musings: 'It is clear that the Islamists are not welcome in all cases, and the accepted and required democracy cannot be ushered in by the Islamist trend unless it abandons its identity and roots. It is hard to convince the Islamists that the democratic path is blocked before us.' (5) This point of view is shared by many MB supporters.

The conclusion, he implies, is that the MB has no option but to confront the army and other political powers that ally themselves with the military.

This is similar to the Algerian scenario after 1992, when the army discarded the election results that had seen the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) win the majority of votes. The FIS, with the Islamist trend generally, initiated armed clashes with the Algerian army, and in the following years the army took control of the levers of power and governance in Algeria.

The second reading interprets the recollection of Qutb's ideology as a question of identity in light of the polarisation and schism that is evident between the secularists and Islamists. Most of the nationalist, leftist and liberal forces, as well as the media, artists and Coptic institutions initially supported the military coup. As a result, the Islamists felt that the core of the issue was the conflict over the identity of Egypt, spirit of civilisation, and the constitutional and legal dimensions related to these. Such feelings resonated with the slogans, cheers and Islamic rhetoric heard in Raba'a Square, which asserted the need to protect the 'Islamic identity' of Egypt. (6)

In such a political atmosphere, where the clamour for identity is preeminent, Sayyid Qutb's writings about the 'pious group' fighting 'jahiliyah' (7) (the state of ignorance of God's guidance) seem relevant and influential.

Recalling Qutb practically is, at the very least, a return to the idea of conflict and confrontation between the MB and the new regime, and a call for a direct stand-off and for the MB's return to articulate the identity rhetoric loudly and clearly. At most, it can signal a resort to arms and violence in the confrontation with security campaigns, arrests, trials and murder, especially by those within the Islamist current that had announced 'ideological reviews' in the past few years, which resulted in their surrendering their weapons and giving up clandestine activities. This includes groups such as the Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group) and the Islamic Jihad Movement.

Peacefulness and democracy as a strategic option

However, the MB's rhetoric maintains and asserts its commitment to democracy, the ballot box and the peaceful option. This was despite everything that took place in Cairo's Raba'a and Nahda squares – arrests and detentions of MB leaders, the security strikes against the MB, talk of it being dissolved and outlawed, the media attack against the MB, attempts to defame it through official propaganda (of the army and public and private media) within the framework of a 'war on terror', and accusations against it of violence

5

and extremism, leading to a political and media atmosphere described by Dr Seif Eddine Abdel Fattah as 'political intoxication'. (8)

How long can the MB tolerate this situation while reasserting the approach of abiding by democracy and peacefulness? How long will it be able to control not just its members and groups supporting it, but also other Islamist organisations and individuals who oppose the coup?

The answers to these questions are related to the conditions on the ground, and potential political scenarios. Thus far, the actions and propaganda of the military – in collaboration with most Egyptian mass media – have not succeeded in ending the marches and protests, or in clearing the streets of the MB and its supporters, even after the vicious crackdown on the Raba'a and Nahda sit-ins.

The military coup is still unable to impose its mechanisms and the roadmap that it had developed. If this leads to a decline in the outputs of the coup, and in access to a political formula that keeps the MB and its Islamist allies in the political game and within an electoral framework, then it is likely the MB will continue to maintain democracy and peacefulness in its political rhetoric.

If the military coup scenario succeeds and the MB is dissolved and banned from the political scene, this will result in a political blockage. The MB and others from the Islamist trend will find no public political platforms to express their political stances and opinions, hope for the achievement of a peaceful political victory against the coup will vanish, then the possible scenario will be a return to the 'ordeal' mentality, a radical vision for change, and an emphasis on identity.

While it is farfetched to think that the MB will officially abandon its peaceful rhetoric and democratic commitment, the 'hijra' (migration) option of some of its members – especially the youth – to isolation and seclusion, or even towards radical ideology in their relation with the state and its institutions, remains a possibility.

Even though this 'last resort' option cannot be disregarded, the general Islamist experience with the idea of clash and confrontation does not point in that direction. It is an option that falls outside the current calculations of the MB, and even that of most of the former radical Islamist currents. In the long run, this can possibly provide the required ground for the birth of the Turkish Islamist model, that is, an Islamist movement that is more developed in its ideological rhetoric and political articulation, and that restructures its slogans and thoughts in a way that overcomes the obstacles created

by the military and by anti-Islamist political rivalries, as the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) was able to do.

There is a similarity in terms of the role of the military institutions in Egypt and Turkey in their attempts to prevent the Islamists from acceding to power. However, developing an Islamist approach towards the military in Egypt requires consideration of an additional factor, as the Turkish experience illustrates. It requires the presence of a democratic framework, electoral mechanisms and independent representative institutions. In Turkey, the influence of the army within the democratic political process is limited to what is referred to as the protection of Ataturk-secular values. In Egypt, on the other hand, both the military and security institutions interfere in many aspects of society and state, and have wideranging influence on the economy, media and politics. This limits the dynamics of the democratic game, and its ability to allow the Islamists to develop their political rhetoric in a manner similar to the Turkish model of the AKP.

Thus, if there is a real problem in the idea of cloning the Turkish model in its form and essence, a revision by the MB may lead to a new formula developed by them that is not necessarily a copy-and-paste operation from the Turks to the Egyptians. Rather, it may rectify what observers call the 'Brotherhood errors' in the recent transitional stage; it may present a more flexible rhetoric that is more cognisant of the balance of power in order for the experiment to succeed, in order to arrive at a national democratic character rather than the traditional MB ideological and 'movement' framework.

The 'last ordeal' scenario: Downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood

Historically, the MB has always been able, after suffering vicious attacks by the security forces, to return and rapidly restore its internal structure. It has thus accumulated historic experience in dealing with such situations. However, Diya Rashwan, an expert on Islamist movements and a supporter of the military coup, doubts that the current experience is anything like previous experiences for the MB. He argues that the current 'ordeal' emerged after the Egyptian people tried living with the MB in power, but that the 'myth' of the MB model collapsed. Today, he says, the MB is facing not only the army, but also the people, the media and many political forces. The title of Rashwan's article refers to his expectations for the inability of the MB to come out of the current 'last ordeal'. (9)

Rashwan, who is an opponent of the MB in Egypt, neglects to mention that he is biased to a particular political point of view and has not thus thoroughly examined the objective conditions surrounding the current experience. There is a broad audience that rejects the military coup and sympathises with the MB due to the suffering they experienced in a

7

short period, including murder, arrests, humiliations and even the killings of two children of MB leaders. (10)

Rashwan's hypothesis is methodologically flawed when comparing what happened after 1954 to the 3 July military coup. Abdel Nasser was also widely popular, and enjoyed great support from the Egyptian media at a time when there was no media supporting the MB. This was before the era of globalisation, and at a time characterised by the authoritarian manipulation of mass media. The media image could not be uploaded from the scene to the internet and go viral within minutes. Such historical circumstances reinforced Qutb's ideas in the MB and the Islamist trend in general. The Islamists bore an equal anger towards the authority and the society, most of whose members stood with Abdel Nasser, abandoning the MB to a disastrous fate.

Dialectic of internal and external factors

The situation for the MB remains precarious, and is open to multiple possibilities regarding the fate of the movement. Thus, the speculation about the 'collapse of political Islam' seems rushed and not constructed on firm a scientific logic. Such a hypothesis about the end of political Islam is even weaker regarding the situation outside Egypt. Moreover, we are facing diverse and multiple cases in dealing with the Arab Spring and the question of power. Consider, for example, the differences between Tunisia and Morocco, or movements that did not accede to power, as in Jordan. There is also the case of those Islamists who formed long alliances with the military power, as in Sudan.

Despite this diversity, however, the events in Egypt will have broader repercussions on the future of the Islamist movements outside that country. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the Egyptian MB has, historically, played a central role in influencing and impacting on Muslim Brotherhood groups in other parts of the world, not only at the global organisational level of the MB and its leaders but also at the moral and ideological levels. This influence began at the time of the group's founder, Hassan al-Banna, and included the influence of Sayyid Qutb. Further, the ideas of many jihadi organisations and individuals, such as Mohamed Abdel Salam Farag and Ayman al-Dhawahiri, were influenced by the ordeal of the MB under the Nasser regime.

Any scenario resulting from the current historical moment in the life of the Egyptian MB, and the resulting rhetoric and ideology adopted by the MB or Islamists in general will find moral and psychological resonance in the rest of the Arab world. However, it will be

an impact restricted by domestic factors that represent the first variable in determining the future of these groups.

Second, events in Egypt have a regional and international context. This can be clearly observed through the wide applause and support received by the military coup from three Arab states – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan – on the diplomatic, economic, media and moral levels. This reflects the presence of Arab regional agendas that are opposed to political Islam and its accession to power in the Arab Spring phase. Practically and realistically, the 'Arab moderate axis' adopts this agenda, with the central role being played by these three states.

The third reason is that the unfolding events in the Arab Spring countries – Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, and particularly in Egypt due to its strategic position and importance in the East, has repercussions on the Arab popular stage. The success of these new Islamist democratic experiences is looked upon as a model that can be exported to other countries, particularly the kingdoms, which fear the transfer of the Arab Spring movements to their territories. This success benefits opposition groups, including Islamist movements, as is the case in Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Algeria. The corollary is also true: the failure and chaos of these experiments, or the success of counter revolutions, benefits the remaining traditional Arab regimes and weakens the moral incentive for people to follow in the footsteps of earlier revolutions and uprisings.

While taking these dimensions into account, they collectively represent the external factor which, if not coupled with the internal factor, will be limited in its impact. What we see on the ground regarding the experiences of other Muslim Brotherhood groups enhances the argument for the need not to rush into generalisations and hasty conclusions, and to be careful in drawing conclusions about the fate of the MB or other political Islamist movements.

In Morocco, despite the problems and crises of the consensual government in which the Justice and Development Party participates, particularly after the dissolution of the ruling coalition, current circumstances and conditions are different from the Egyptian case. The main factor in the Moroccan experience is not the military but the institution of the royal palace. Furthermore, the country did not witness a revolution similar to the one in Tunisia and Egypt as the king pre-emptively initiated constitutional and political reforms that paved the way for the recent parliamentary elections and the formation of a coalition government. (11)

9

In case the Justice and Development Party fails to achieve its electoral promises and political programmes, it will return to the opposition benches, which is a natural result in the framework of the democratic game. It is not similar in any way to the Egyptian case where the democratically elected president and the shura council were overthrown and a constitution that was approved by most Egyptians in a referendum was stomped on by the army in alliance with anti-MB forces and with the support of certain civil society groups.

In Jordan, the equation looks completely different, as the MB (along with the Political Action Front which represents the MB politically) still insists on boycotting parliamentary and municipal elections as was the case over the past two years. It did not reach any understanding with the monarchy which introduced constitutional and political reforms that were considered by the opposition, including the MB, as less than what was required. The relation between the state and the MB is still unstable while the political crisis in the country is at an impasse.

Although persons with close ties to the security institutions and the conservative trend in Jordan are clamouring to copy the Egyptian example by restructuring the legal presence of the group and declaring its victory after the military strike it received in Cairo, this scenario is farfetched and invalid considering the data regarding the internal equation. The historical experience of the system in dealing with the MB is different from the Egyptian case even though the relation between the two parties has remained in crisis for years. (12)

The third example is the Tunisian case, which is most similar to the Egyptian one in several ways: the Islamists are in power and they acceded to power after decades of being banned, hounded by security forces and pursuant to a revolution by the masses. Today, they face an active secular opposition and an attempt to develop a Tamarod (Rebel) movement similar to the one in Egypt. However, the response of the Ennahda party to these developments is different from the response of the Egyptian MB. Ennahda displayed great flexibility and willingness to reform the government, and to restructure the constitution-drafting committee. (13) Moreover, Ennahda has partners in government from outside the Islamist circle. The government settled the controversy with the Islamist group, Ansar al-Shari'ah, by labelling it a 'terrorist organisation' and holding it responsible for the assassination of two prominent secular political opponents. (14)

Hamas seems to be the hardest hit among Islamist movements outside Egypt in the aftermath of the 3 July coup. It also experienced a vicious media and political attack

from the Egyptian media and anti-MB political groups. It was dealt with as an enemy of the Egyptian people, and held directly responsible for the events in the Sinai, including clashes between the army and militant forces. Maintaining a relationship with Hamas has become a charge punishable by law in Egypt.

Conclusion

The speculation about the collapse of political Islam in Egypt might have found powerful evidence to support it if the military had succeeded in establishing the image of a people's revolution on 30June against MB rule, and had convincingly explained what had happened later as 'protection of democracy' from 'MB fascism' (according to the media propaganda of the pro-army media). However, this image dissipated when masses of MB sympathisers and supporters rallied in the streets, when violence was used to confront them, with the arrest of its leaders, the killing of thousands of its supporters, the detention and injury of others, and the return to using torture and persecution as is the case with authoritarian regimes.

The fate of political Islam – in more than one country – will necessarily be impacted upon by the general outcome of these experiences. For the picture to become clearer will require a period of waiting and patient observation over the coming years during which the developments, possibilities and results of this transitional stage will unfold.

Importantly, the experience of political Islam is not only governed by what floats to the political surface in one country or another, or the success of one of the groups representing this trend, it is related to more profound issues such as the question of the cultural identities of these societies, and of the relationship between religion and politics and relation with self before relation with others. Islamist groups in general adopt the dream of a broad social current, maintaining and asserting a vital role for religion, which requires thorough social and cultural ideological settlement in answering these structural questions. This cannot be dissolved by a security strike, political exclusion, or through losing or winning any single election.

Endnotes

(1) See Muhammad Hassan al-Banna, 'Religious Parties', Akhbar al-Youm, 1 September 2013. http://akhbar.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/151095/6/بسم-الله.html. Also, Nahed Hotor, 'The Downfall of the Political Islam Era', Lebanese, 7 December 2012. Also see Alaa al-Aswani, 'The Downfall of Morsi, the End of Political Islam in Egypt', Al-Ahram e-portal, 11 July 2013. http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/371483.aspx, and 'Assad considers Morsi's downfall as the end of political Islam', Al-Dostoor, 11 July 2013. http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/371483.aspx.

(2) See Khalil Al-Anani, 'The Brotherhood revives its Mehna narrative', Foreign Policy, 15 July 2013. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/07/15/the_brotherhood _revives_its_mehna_narrative. Also see 'Analyser: Suppression will bring back the Brotherhood to Nasser's days', CNN Arabia, 15 August 2013. http://arabic.cnn.com/2013/middle_east/8/15/fawaz.gerges/index.html.

(3) About Sayyid Qutb's ideology and role in the Islamist movement and Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones), see Mohammed Abu Romman, 'Political Repair in Islamist Ideology: Comparisons, powers, priorities and strategies', Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut, 2010, 185-190.

(4) Interview with the researcher in Salt city, 5 August 2013.

(5) Ibid.

(6) See 'Slogans of "Islam, Islam" overwhelm the sound of Apaches', 19 July 2013, IslamMemo. http://www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2013/07/19/176786.html.

(7) See Sayyid Qutb, Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones), Dar al-Shuruq, Cairo, 1979, 5-10.

(8) See Seif Abdel Fattah, 'What is happening now in Egypt is political intoxication', El-Shaab El-Gadeed, 20 August 2013. http://elshaab.org/thread.php?ID=70513.

(9) Diya Rashwan, 'The Last Ordeal of the Muslim Brotherhood', al-Masry al-Youm, 25 August 2013. http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/2062381, and a similar opinion, Abdel Aleem Mahmoud, 'Questions on the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood', Al-Bawabh, 15 August 2013. http://www.albawabhnews.com/articles/111127.

(10) Diya Rashwan, 'The Last Ordeal of the Muslim Brotherhood'.

(11) See Mahmoud Ma'arouf, 'Tough negotiations waiting for Benkirane to form the Moroccan government', Swiss Info, 26 July 2013. http://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/detail/content.html?cid=36537936.

(12) See Mohammed Abu Romman, 'Jordan's Brotherhood under the "Egyptian Trauma"', al-Monitor, 19 July 2013. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/contents/articles/opinion/2013/07/jordan-egypt-muslim-brotherhood.html.

(13) See 'Tunisian Ennahda seeks consensual solutions', Al Khaleej, 12 August 2013. http://www.alkhaleej.ae/portal/e24fe87b-fd74-4272-a22b-1ddb39a1d23f.aspx.

(14) See 'Fears in Tunisia of consequences of outlawing Ansar al-Shari'ah', Al Jazeera Net. http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/fbef6949-65f5-426d-abb6-29c42e8a5516

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