Arab Islamists, from Opposition to Power: A Critical Appraisal

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The popular uprisings that toppled Arab autocrats and became widely known as the "Arab Spring" have drastically altered domestic and regional politics. Islamists, once the long-standing victims of Arab regimes, have become the new rulers in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, and will likely have significant clout in Libya, Syria, and Yemen in the coming years, too. Yet the crucial question is: to what extent can Islamists fulfil the aspirations of the Arab Spring and will their reign and polices foster or hinder democratic transition in the region?

The aim of this paper is twofold: to examine the changes and transformations that have reshaped Islamist politics in the Arab world over the past two years and to assess the ability of the new Islamist governments to govern effectively and to satisfy their people.

Islamists before the Arab Spring

The rise of Islamist parties after the Arab Spring comes as no surprise. For decades, Islamists used regime repression to build up their networks and image. They shrewdly turned their political malaise into social and political capital, allowing them to recruit new members and increase their social clout among different social strata. Moreover, over time, Islamists became attuned to the rules of the political game. Hence, they routinely participated in elections, built alliances with liberal and secular forces, and, more importantly, leveraged regime repression to broaden their public appeal. In addition, Islamists built strong, nationwide social networks. They capitalised on the disenchantment of the poor and improvised means of securing political gains. For instance, they provided shelter for many of the poor and lower-middle class.

Moreover, Islamism, as a political and religious ideology, portrayed itself as a promise of "salvation," able to provide a refuge for young Arabs who had been marginalised and alienated by the urbanisation and corrupt policies of the former regimes. Islamism, for many urban and conservative youth, constituted the only emancipator from the "profane" and from temporal politics. Not surprisingly, Islamists are remarkably skilled at turning people's despair and disenchantment to their advantage in order to enhance their social impact. Islamists also benefited from regime repression in terms of securing sympathy and support outside their core ideological and religious base. However, Islamists are most noticeably invested in their "sacred" promise: establishing an "Islamic State."[1] For decades, they advocated reshaping political structures and societal norms, values, and morals to bring them into line with their religious perceptions and worldview.

Unsurprisingly, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, religion has become one of the most vigorous and visible components of the Arab transition. Therefore, accounts that labelled the Arab uprisings "post-Islamist" revolutions might have been premature.[2] It may be

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[1] AYOUBI, Nazih. *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*. London: Routledge, 1991.

[2] See, for example, BAYAT, Asef. "The Post-Islamist Revolutions: What the Revolts in the Arab World Mean," *Foreign Affairs*, 26 April 2011. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67812/asef-bayat/the-post-islamist-revolutions

true that the young people who sparked off the revolutions were mostly non-Islamists. However, Islamists deliberately kept a low profile during the uprisings to avoid regime repression and to diffuse Western fears of their powerful representation. More strikingly, participation in the Arab revolutions was not confined to one Islamist faction. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) took part in the revolution, as did both former jihadists and independent Islamists. In Tunisia, followers of the Ennahda movement took part in the revolution. In Libya, Abdel-Hakim Belhaj, a former jihadist and co-founder of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), led the final assault on Tripoli. Moreover, from a sociological point of view, religion was not far from the surface. Mosques were used to mobilise the masses. Political rallies often started at them after Friday prayers.

From the "Fringes" to the "Centre"

The new Islamist scene in the Arab world is far from monolithic. Rather, it is fluid, dynamic and, most notably, divisive. From Egypt to Morocco, Islamist movements and parties have flourished and plunged into post-revolution politics. For instance, there are some 20 registered and unregistered Islamist parties in Egypt, in addition to dozens more groups, movements, and networks that are still fluid and have no organisational structure. Apparently, the Arab revolutions have removed the political and security barriers that hindered Islamists for years and have allowed their leaders and youth to enter the political landscape. Moreover, the Islamist scene is no longer dominated by veteran Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and radical groups. It encompasses different movements and parties from the full spectrum of Islamists. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of the Islamist landscape in the Middle East, many commonalities can still be found. In this sense, certain characteristics describe the Islamist scene in general two years after the Arab Spring.

First, Islamists can be divided into three main blocs. The first bloc consists of traditional Islamists and includes the Muslim Brotherhood, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (PJD), and the Tunisian Ennahda Party. The second bloc encompasses Salafis, including the politicised Salafist movements and their preachers and sheikhs. Finally,

there is a Salafi jihadist strain, whose members embrace a more radical and extreme ideology. While there may be other groups and currents representing a mishmash of these three main blocs, they do not play as strong a role in the overall Islamist scene. Perhaps one of the most striking features of the scene in general is the Islamists' tendency to abandon religious activities for politics – their rush towards politicisation. There are several explanations for this. For example, Islamists are keen to engage in all forms of political activity to abort any attempt to establish a regime that opposes their thought. They are also trying to benefit from the extraordinary political openness following the revolution. At the same time, they are trying to introduce religion into the public sphere and infuse their ideology into politics.

Second, there is a growing tendency among Islamists, including Salafi jihadists, to engage in formal politics, rather than remaining outside it, at least compared to the fragmented and disorganised liberal and secular forces. In addition, Islamists seem keener to accept the rules of the political game, even if their understanding of democracy is structurally defective. Islamists are also able to unite against their opponents, unlike civil groups, which suffer from divisions and rifts.

One of the most striking features is the Islamists' tendency to abandon religious activities for politics

Third, the past two years have shown the disparity between Islamists' slogans and their actual policies and platforms. This reflects their lack of political experience, including among those who have engaged in public activity for decades. Despite coming to power, Islamists have shown limited capacity and aptitude in running their countries after the revolutions. Finally, fourth, Islamists tend to dominate the political scene and exclude other forces, a defect symptomatic of their poor understanding of democracy. The long-standing MB suffers from this defect as much as the newer groups, such as the Salafis and former jihadists, in spite of its claims to the contrary over the past two years. This tendency governs both the behaviour and discourse of many Islamists.

From Piety to Politics: The Rise of the Salafis

The startling rise of Salafism (Salafiyya) remains the most visible feature of the new Islamist scene in the Middle East. After decades of eschewing politics for theological and political reasons, Salafi movements and groups rushed into electoral politics enthusiastically. They became keen to form political parties, contest elections, and vie for power. In Egypt, the Salafi parties fared well in the post-revolution parliamentary elections and played a key role in drafting Egypt's new constitution.

Despite coming to power, Islamists have shown limited capacity and aptitude in running their countries after the revolutions

This notwithstanding, Salafis are far from monolithic. There are different strands, currents, and groups. However, over the past two years, Salafis have sought to position themselves in the public sphere in the Arab world. They have ardently attempted to set the agenda for the political debate in Egypt and elsewhere. Most surprisingly, despite their political inexperience, Salafis fared surprisingly well in the parliamentary elections in Egypt after the revolution. They used their deeply rooted social networks to encourage citizens to vote for their candidates. They also built alliances and coalitions with different political forces. Yet the Salafis, like other political forces, have also experienced several divisions and splits over the past two years. For instance, the Nour Party, the main Salafi party in Egypt, has witnessed many divisions and splits over politics. Moreover, the Salafis' discourse, strategies, and tactics are changing. Before the Arab Spring, the Salafist discourse was mostly dogmatic, dealing with theological matters of sin and virtue. There was no dialogue, no debate, no need to weigh the "costs and benefits." Now things are significantly different. Not only do Salafist leaders tend to engage in a more pragmatic discourse, they also seek to share power. Moreover, when the Nour Party entered the electoral fray, it did not promise paradise as a reward for voting for its candidates, but rather pledged to improve the economy, reform education and healthcare, and fight cor-

ruption. Some Nour Party candidates may have resorted to "religious rhetoric" in their campaigns, but this tendency cannot be said to have applied across the board, nor did it reach an absolutist level.

The Intra-Islamist Feud

One of the key features of the Islamist scene in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is the number of feuds and disputes due to the unprecedented rise in the degree of competition, polarisation, and conflict within the movement. Egypt offers a unique window into the tensions between Islamist groups, whose relationships are constantly shifting as a result of the political decisions the different factions make at any given time. For instance, the most visible political conflict in Egypt now is not between Islamists and secular forces but rather among just the former. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), and the Salafist Calling (*al-Da'wa l-Salafiyya*), with its Nour Party, have locked horns over control of the State, society and public space, and each one struggles to seize as much power as it can. Over the past two years, the Salafists have been keen to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from consolidating its grip on power. This started during the 2011 elections, when the Brotherhood underestimated the political weight of the Salafists and disregarded their political aspirations. However, following the Salafists' abrupt victory in the elections – they won around 24% of the parliamentary seats – the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to contain them and defuse their political rise, while the latter became more politically unruly and aspired to even greater gains.

Emboldened by their political achievement, the Salafists have attempted to block the Brotherhood's path to power. In a striking move, the Nour Party and its patrons, the Salafi Call, decided not to support Mohamed Morsi during the first round of the presidential elections before once again changing course to support him in the second round under the banner of "protecting the Islamic project."

Furthermore, after Morsi took office, the Salafists became even more apprehensive and suspicious of the Brotherhood's intentions. They sought both to enhance their political sway in Egyptian politics and to compel the Brotherhood to respect (and accept)

their aspirations to power. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood has adopted a shrewder, twofold strategy towards the Salafists: to co-opt them and, at the same time, to use them. The bargain, or trade-off, between the two sides was simple: the Salafists would have a much greater role in drafting Egypt's new constitution, and, in return, they would align themselves with the Brotherhood against secular and liberal forces and resist any external pressure or calls for genuine democratic reforms. It was this bargain that enabled Morsi to survive the street pressure that followed his controversial constitutional declaration and that helped the Brotherhood to pass the constitution. It lasted until the Salafists became aware of the increasing attempts by the Muslim Brotherhood to marginalise and exclude them following the ratification of the constitution.

The crisis between the Brotherhood and the Salafists reveals that power – not religion or ideology – is Islamists' ultimate goal

Contrary to what might appear on the surface to be a "holy" alliance against secular and liberal forces, the inherited mistrust and divergence between the Salafists and the Brotherhood is enormous. Over the past few months, the conflict between them has turned into a cat-and-mouse game. Whereas the Salafists have attempted to benefit from the mounting resentment against Morsi and the Brotherhood to achieve more political gains, the Brotherhood has sought to encourage internal divisions among the Salafists.

To benefit from the growing feelings of anti-ikhwanism, the Salafists decided to jump on the bandwagon. The Nour Party thus launched a political initiative to end the standoff between the National Salvation Front (NSF), a loose alliance of secular and liberal forces, and Morsi. The step was perceived by the

Muslim Brotherhood as an attempt by the Salafists to strengthen their political clout and image before the parliamentary elections scheduled to be held in October 2013. In addition, by escalating the conflict with Morsi, the Salafists are attempting to dismiss the accusation of being subordinates and lackeys to the Muslim Brotherhood. Not surprisingly, Salafi leaders have recently asserted that the Nour Party "will never ally with the Muslim Brotherhood."

Indeed, the crisis between the Brotherhood and the Salafists reveals that power – not religion or ideology – is Islamists' ultimate goal, and their bid to grab it could usher in a new era of intra-Islamist conflict with unpredictable consequences.

Islamists in Power… Ideology Is Not Enough

Despite the rise of Islamist parties, they are clearly unable to provide viable solutions to the chronic socio-economic problems that plague Arab societies. It is one of the "unintended outcomes" of a transition process, to use Schmitter and Karl's definition of democratic transition. Moreover, the "lenient" and dubious reaction of Islamist governments towards the mounting influence and role of radical and violent extremists has jeopardised their image and credibility as truly "moderate" and peaceful movements and may undermine their rule if they fail to restrain it. From Morocco to Egypt, the inability of Islamist parties to effectively run the transitions is evident. Their track records over the past two years are poor and depressing, revealing a significant lack of vision and skill in running their countries and in moving away from the old and towards new democratic regimes. Certainly, no one would expect this to happen smoothly or quickly. However, Islamists' behaviour and actions are not ushering in a new era.

In Egypt,[3] as well as in Tunisia[4] and Morocco,[5] Islamists have not fulfilled their longstanding pledge of prosperity and renaissance (Nahda).[6] So far, they

[3] "Egypt's economy going to dogs," *The Economist*, 30/03/2013. www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21574533-unless-president-muhammad-morsi-broadens-his-government-egypts-economy-looks

[4] "Tunisia government says draft deal to avoid general strike," *Ahram Online*, 11/12/2012. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/60315/World/Region/Tunisia-government-says-draft-deal-to-avoid-genera.aspx

[5] "Thousands march as Morocco's labor unions protest economic reforms by Islamist-led government," *Washington Post*, 31/3/2013. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-31/business/38171188_1_rabat-morocco-government

[6] "Morsi's Electoral Program – General Features of Nahda (Renaissance) Project," *Ikhwanweb*, 28/4/2013. www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29932

have failed to fight corruption, fix the ailing economies, respect human and minority rights, and advance democratic agendas. And the more they fail, the less their credibility and image can be restored. Not surprisingly, many Arab people still take to the streets to express their frustration and disenchantment with the Islamists' policies. For many, Islamist ideology cannot resolve their problems. Nor can it provide the salvation they aspired to after the many cases of immorality and incompetency.[7]

Apparently, there is a growing sense of desacralisation of Islamist ideology. By this I mean that Islamism, as a religious and political ideology, is increasingly losing its credibility and symbolic power. After two years in power, Islamists' policies have not facilitated a big change from the old regimes, nor has their ideology preserved its purity and sanctity. Moreover, Islamists' behaviour has shown that they, like other human beings, are prone to making mistakes and committing sins.[8] Furthermore, the increasing erosion of Islamists' credibility coupled with the excessive "Islamisation" of the public sphere could lead many young people, albeit in the long term, to reject Islamism, if not the very idea of religion.[9] If this happens, Islamism, as a religious and cultural project, would be vehemently self-defeated.[10] In other words, while Islamist parties are ascending, their ideology, "Islamism," is surprisingly on the decline.

The Brotherhood Quandary

Since taking office, President Mohamed Morsi and the Brotherhood have utterly failed to provide viable solutions to the many problems overwhelming Egyptian society. The growing anti-Brotherhood sentiment only shows how frustrated and despairing many Egyptians have become with the MB's rule. The MB's behaviour and attitude over the past few months has alienated non-Islamists and cast doubts on its real commitment towards democratic values. Even in foreign policy, Morsi seems an unconvincing leader and is endangering Egypt's interests regionally and internationally.[11] While the MB may still have support and appeal in some segments of society, it is struggling to expand its territory outside its core religious and social base.[12] Many middle- and upper-middle-class young people feel they have been betrayed by the MB and Morsi.[13] Even among the poor and suburban youth, the MB is facing increasing frustration.[14] Clearly, the MB's longstanding patronage policy cannot cover the 77.5% of young Egyptians (from 15 to 29 years old) who do not have jobs and fuel the unrest in the country.[15]

Nevertheless, the most pressing question is: why have President Mohammed Morsi and his patron, the Muslim Brotherhood, failed, so far, in running Egypt's transition? There are two ways to answer this question. The first is short and easy, ascribing this failure to the Brotherhood's ideology and its hunger for power. The second – which is tougher and more intricate – refers to the ability and readiness of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a social and political agent, to adapt to the new environment and realities that emerged in Egypt after the revolution.

It is certainly true that the Brotherhood's behaviour is baffling and vexing; however, this underscores the fact that the movement is far from rigid or immutable. Therefore, instead of decrying or rebuking Morsi and

[7] "Egyptian Islamist MP caught in 'indecent act' with teenage girl," *Al-Arabiya,* 8/6/2012.
http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/08/219475.html

[8] KIRKPARTICK, David D. "Morsi Admits 'Mistakes' in Drafting Egypt's Constitution," *The New York Times*, 26/12/2012. www.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/world/middleeast/morsi-admits-mistakes-in-drafting-egypts-constitution.html?_r=1&

[9] ALLAM, Rana. "A generation of atheists," *The Daily News Egypt*, 27/1/2013.
www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/07/a-generation-of-atheists/

[10] ABDELFATTAH, Mohamed. "Leaving Islam in the Age of Islamism," *The Daily News Egypt*, 24/1/2013. www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/01/24/leaving-islam-in-the-age-of-islamism/

[11] http://alhayat.com/Details/473530

[12] EZZAT, Dina. "Image polishing," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 16/1/2013. http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/1074/17/Image-polishing.aspx

[13] FAYED, Shaimaa and MOHAMED, Yusri. "Egyptian protesters defy curfew, attack police stations," *Reuters*, 28/1/2013. www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/28/us-egypt-anniversary-idUSBRE90N1E620130128

[14] FLEISHMAN, Jeffrey. "Under Egypt's political unrest seethes the rising anger of the poor," *Los Angeles Times*, 2/2/2013. http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/02/world/la-fg-egypt-broken-economy-20130203

[15] EL-BEHARI, Hend. "Egypt's unemployment rate hits record high in second quarter," *Ahram Online*, 14/8/2012. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/0/50405/Business/0/Egypts-unemployment-rate-hits-record-high-in-secon.aspx

the Brotherhood for their many faults, as some "observers" do, it is more useful – albeit for the sake of analysis – to understand and construe why they behave in such a disturbing manner. Likewise, it is highly misleading and inaccurate to argue that the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood over the past few months was unavoidable due to its desperate hunger for power.

Since the Brotherhood was founded in 1928, its members have been trained how to protest, oppose, and challenge political regimes, but not how to govern or rule

Despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has more professionals, including doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers, than any other social or political movement in Egypt, it lacks the technocratic and bureaucratic experience and skills that could enable it to govern effectively. Ironically, while the Brotherhood has always been credited for its robust and competent organisational structure, which enabled it to sustain itself for decades, its ability to morph this organisational experience and the associated capabilities into an effective governing body is significantly weak and limited. As a proselytisation movement, the Brotherhood indoctrinates its members to become "preachers" not "statesmen." For decades, the socialisation and identification process that occurred within the Brotherhood aimed mainly to reshape individuals' identity to become devout and loyal members, not mere politicians. For the Brotherhood, it was the only way to maintain members' commitment and solidarity and to ensure its survival in the face of the many attempts of the Mubarak regime to undermine its leadership and activities.

Not surprisingly, after the 25 January uprising it was quite difficult for the Brotherhood to make the needed shift from being the regime's subject to owning it. In other words, the Brotherhood's leaders are struggling to become the new policymakers follow-

ing decades of being targeted. This became more palpable after its useless attempts to infiltrate the State's bureaucracy revealed its ineptness for governance.

Moreover, since the Brotherhood was founded in 1928, its members have been trained how to protest, oppose, and challenge political regimes, but not how to govern or rule. In addition, the brutal repression and exclusion under Mubarak undermined the Brotherhood's former hopes of not only sharing power with the former regime, but, more importantly, being included in state institutions. "We were treated as second-class citizens," a senior Brotherhood leader once told me.

Furthermore, the Brotherhood's cadres never ran a public institution, whether on a local or national level. They were barred from public office and excluded from having influential posts within the state bureaucracy. Unlike their counterparts in Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), who gained significant governing experience during the 1990s, the Brotherhood's leaders had no access to provincial and municipal administration in Egypt, which was completely under the control of the former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) and its rotten lackeys in the public sector. In other words, the Brotherhood's members were never trained to be professional civil servants. The greatest experience they obtained was from running mosques, syndicates and welfare societies, in which their performance and record was remarkable and indisputable. Ironically, those who possess some strategic and administrative skills, such as the Brotherhood's mastermind Khairat el-Shater, are politically conservative. They embrace a narrow-minded vision that tends to disdain and alienate their opponents. The Muslim Brotherhood's predicament in power reveals how difficult it is for organisations to move, overnight, from the peripheries of politics to its centre and to make the shift in mindset from ruled to ruler.

To conclude, if the Arab Spring tells us anything after two years of torturous transition, it is that the Islamists will not be able to preserve power and credibility without fulfilling peoples' aspirations and needs, which may put their future at stake.