Towards Political Reform in Egypt: Inclusion of Islamists in the Political Process

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Abstract

A great deal of debate has centered on the issue of political Islam and the inclusion of Islamists in the political process. The contentiousness of this issue stems from the disagreement on the so-called “paradox of democracy”. The famous "one man, one vote, one time" argument has become almost like a cliché, repeated by all those who fear that Islamists would use elections to come to power only to subvert the system and install their own antidemocratic, totalitarian and theocratic style regimes. In the meantime a blind eye is turned on the abuses committed by incumbent regimes in an effort to cling to power; actions that are in fact the real impediments to democracy in the region.

In contrast to this argument of the paradox of democracy, a great deal of literature has appeared that more objectively analyses political Islam and which as a result contends that democratization cannot be fully achieved in the region without the participation of Islamists.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has accepted multiparty competition and the values of a pluralistic society and vow to participate according to these rules, however the government has continued to deny their right to be recognized as a political party.

This paper will focus on the political implications and effects of inclusion of Islamist movements in the political process in Egypt in light of the debate over the issue of democratization in the Middle East in general. The purpose of the paper will be to prove that inclusion indeed fosters moderation among proponents of political Islam and allows for a more constructive relation with the state that fosters pluralism and advances democracy.

Introduction

The issue of democratization has become an extremely contentious one in the post-9/11 Middle East. In the context of a severe shortage of democracy in the region, there is little disagreement that some degree of democratization and/or political liberalization is needed. Among the marked changes in American foreign policy in the Middle East has been the new commitment to democratization and further political liberalization as embodied in the Initiative for a Greater Middle East. However, the issue of democratization has not been free of controversy in its targeted region. The contentiousness with which this issues is met stems from disagreement surrounding the
so-called “paradox of democracy”, and “the fear that democratic elections will bring about …anti-democratic [regimes]”(Schwedler J.). Egypt is by far no exception to this rule; the paradox of “pretentious” democracy in this case has been engrained in the regime for several decades—while claiming to be a democratic regime, President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak’s government has continually refused to legalize and recognize the popular Muslim Brotherhood, originally banned under Nasser’s rules in 1954. In light of renewed vigorous debate over political reform in Egypt and especially over democratization, the issue of inclusion of Islamists—mainly the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (MB), but also the Wasat Party—cannot be ignored. In fact, full and sincere democratization and the proper implementation of the principles of pluralism cannot be achieved without the inclusion of Islamists in the political process. This paper will focus on the necessity and political implications of inclusion of the MB and other Islamist movements in the political process in light of this debate over the issue of democratization and political reform in Egypt. Drawing from literature on the process of democratization, the paper will begin by demonstrating theoretically that inclusion indeed fosters moderation among proponents of political Islam and allows for a more constructive relation with the state that encourages pluralism and advances democracy. Taking the Muslim brotherhood as the main Islamist force in Egypt, the purpose of the paper will be to prove that they can, indeed, become credible players in the political process and must be legalized if comprehensive and sincere political reform is to be undertaken.

Even before the happenings of September 11 and the change in US foreign policy, a great deal of debate was centered on the issue of political Islam and the inclusion of Islamists in the political process. Scores of scholars and members of the regime have voiced their concern about political Islam, viewing it as a threat and obstacle to the process of democratization, citing such reasons as the rejection of the concept of democracy as incompatible with Islam by Islamists and the intolerant and uncompromising nature of these movements. The argument used is that inclusion of Islamists in the process of democratization would most likely reverse the process and not enhance democracy. The famous “one man, one vote, one time” argument has become almost like a cliché, repeated by all those who fear that Islamists would use elections to come to power only to subvert the system and install their own antidemocratic, totalitarian and theocratic style regimes (Tessler, M. p 281). In the meantime, a blind eye is turned on the abuses committed by incumbent regimes in an effort to cling to power - actions that are, in fact, the real impediments to democracy in the region. Indeed, strengthened by the “War on Terror” that came in the aftermath of September 11th, Mubarak has steadfastly maintained the argument that the Muslim Brotherhood cannot be legalized as a political party nor included in democratic reform because they will only subvert democracy once they get to power. The government thus uses this logic to clamp down on the MB when threatened and readily resort to mass arrests, imprisonment without trial and torture to keep the MB at bay.

In contrast to this argument of the paradox of democracy, a great deal of literature has appeared that more objectively analyses political Islam and which contends that democratization cannot be fully achieved in the region without the participation of
Islamists. Proponents of this view discredit the perception of political Islam as a monolithic phenomenon and instead extend the argument that there must be a distinction between mainstream Islamists who are characterized as moderates and the more extreme, fundamentalist Islamists who are on the fringe of Islamism. Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan, Mark Tessler, writing on democratization and Islamic resurgence in the Middle East, stresses the need to distinguish between “moderate”, “accommodationist” and “legalist” groups, which are more popular and mainstream, on the one hand, and more “radical” and “militant” groups, which are less popular, on the other hand (p 282). Based on this view of Islamic resurgence, Tessler extends the argument that

…Participation in the democratic process may… alter the views and leadership structure of Muslim political movements, further moderating and “normalizing those Islamist groups that acquire a share of legitimate political power (p 283).

He further argues that support for Islamists comes mainly from those in society who wish to see a change in the status quo through more political liberalization and democratization, thus reasoning that inclusion will encourage Islamists to commit to democracy and pluralism in order to maintain support. Tessler also asserts that many Islamist movements in the Middle East have shown positive signs of commitment to democracy and pluralism by displaying a “willingness to bargain and form coalitions with nonreligious parties, and a willingness to accept defeats as well as victory in the electoral process” (p 283). He concludes that the greatest impediment to the realization of democracy in the Middle East comes from the “continuing resistance of established political regimes [who]…. rarely permit political liberalization beyond that which they can orchestrate and control” (p 285-6).

Another keen proponent of this argument who stresses the imperative need to include political Islam in the process of democratization is senior political analyst, Jennifer Noyon. In her analysis of Islamic movements, she defines political Islam as “movements …who seek a legitimate role in pluralistic systems, often alongside secular parties”, movements which are among the most “authentic” in the region and who “have the makings of a counter-elite capable of challenging the dominance of [secular regimes]” (p 7). She stresses the need to distinguish between political Islam from fundamentalism, stating that mainstream Islamists “act as a bridge between traditional Islamic thought and values and modern social and political structures” and thus accept the compatibility of Islam and democracy. She supports her argument for the inclusion of political Islam in the democratization process based on this description of political Islam. Furthermore, to prove that Islamists are capable of existing in a multi-party system and are committed to pluralism and democracy she sites the following characteristics that make them viable participants:

An expressed willingness to compete according to the rules of multi-party politics and remain players within the system; a concern for human rights; roots in traditional, authentic culture but with a contemporary, populist approach to politics; the ability to attract leadership from new socio-economic strata, giving a voice to the upwardly mobile; support for free-market economics coupled with concern for social justice; a reputation for supporting clean government; a
concern for local, pragmatic issues such as refuse collection and local administration (p 47).

She further argues that repression only serves to breed violence, radicalism and uncompromising attitudes among Islamists and hinders the process of democratization rather than advances it, as would the proponents of the paradox of democracy and political exclusion argue (p 34). She comes to the conclusion that a “fully functioning democracy” cannot be achieved without Islamists (p 42).

In light of this debate and in light of the increasing significance and talk of political reform and democratization in Egypt, there is a need to appraise the MB in order to ascertain whether they demonstrate the characteristics that qualify them as viable participants in the political game. Even though it is important to analyze the MB’s goals, as well as changes in policy and involvement in politics over the past two decades in order to qualify them for political inclusion, it is their recent assertive role in the “reform buzz” that more fully demonstrates their commitment to democracy and pluralism and disproves the logic of the paradox of democracy.

The MB can be defined as a “politically centrist and moderate group representing mainstream political Islam” (Abed-Kotob). Highly organized, they are the largest and most popular opposition group in Egypt today, commanding strong grass roots support from the country’s population of more than 70 million. Their goals are centered on social reform and the gradual Islamization of society from bottom up in order to eventually establish “an Islamic community governed by Shari’a” using non-violent and peaceful means (Al Sayyid p8). They continually seek to affect this social reform through socialization, by propagating the message of Islam and calling on Muslims to follow the tenets of Islam (Da’wa) and by participating in the political system to influence government to apply the Shari’a. The MB regard constitutional rule to be the closest system to Islamic rule, provided that the constitution is based on the Shari’a. They accept democracy as compatible with Islam, a stance they have maintained since their founding father Hassan al Banna first laid down the foundation of an Islamic government on the basis of consultation (shura is the Islamic concept that corresponds to the Western definition of democracy) and representation and placed the ruler accountable to the people and subject to the will of the ummah or nation. They have also demonstrated a commitment to pluralism and continually refer to the freedoms of press and expression in their discourse and their statements (Abed-Kotob). The MB readily demands the implementation of “an open multiparty system” that ensures democratic freedoms and would allow them to operate legally and “independently”. Despite their initial stance against multiparty politics as a system that breeds division amongst the Umma, they have, since the early 1940’s, realized that political accommodation is necessary if they are to have any influence and as a result have adopted the strategy of working “within the existing political system for the advancement of their goals” (Abed-Kotob). In fact, the MB has since the mid 1980s “sought to gain recognition as a political party like all others” (Al Sayyid p10).
The participation of the MB in elections, while bound by the fact that they are not legally recognized, has not only demonstrated their willingness to work within the existing system but also their willingness to forge alliances with secular parties and to play fairly in the game of politics. In the 1984 parliamentary elections, the MB went into an alliance with the secular and liberal New Wafd party, with MB candidates appearing on the party’s slate (El Sayyid p10). In 1987 they formed a tripartite alliance with the Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Liberal Party in an “Islamic Alliance” in order to contest elections, showing their ability to bargain with and influence parties. They boycotted the following two elections in 1990 and 1995 in protest of the unfair nature of elections. In 2000 they were allowed to run as independents and have, since then, maintained the largest opposition block in parliament; they won seventeen seats of the 454 seat parliament, a number equal to all the seats won by other opposition parties combined (Al Sayyid p10). They have also made considerable electoral gains in most professional syndicates, achieving majority representation even in “professions usually dominated by the liberal intelligentsia” (Al Sayyid p10). It should be noted that syndicates are among the most significant and influential private organizations in Egypt.

The insistence of the MB on political participation and on recognition as a political party stems from their belief that this is as an essential process to create a channel of communication between their group and society in order to “[promote] awareness at the societal level, thus aiding in the creation of the Islamic society” and as a method to keep the ruler in check—they have indeed relied for long on “constitutional channels for instituting the changes they demand” (Abed-Kotob). However, the MB continually asserts that they do not seek “power for the sake of power”—that their participation in the political system does not mean that they seek power for themselves—and that, instead, “leaders stress that the Islamic state need not be governed by the Brethren, but must be governed by one who will uphold Islamic precepts” (Abed-Kotob). The current General Guide of the MB, Mohamed Akef, continues to assert that the group “is not plotting in the dark to take over the state” (Abdel Latif “Settling…”). Note also that notwithstanding Esam El Erian’s (a prominent MB figure) unilateral announcement of his intentions to run for president this year, Akef had maintained that the MB would support any candidate who subscribes to their reform agenda.

Despite continuous arrests, allegations of torture, and cyclical clampdowns by the government on the group’s activity, the group has rarely placed itself in confrontation with the government. The MB constantly seek dialogue with the government and have, on several occasions, maintained a supportive stance towards its activities. In 2003, and during the war on Iraq, the government relied on the MB to stage a demonstration to vent public outrage at the war and at the government’s inaction. In 2004, when the US released its Middle East Partnership initiative that detailed how it would go about reforming Middle Eastern countries the MB released its own initiative that rejected foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs and, according to General Guide Mohamed Akef, was “meant to boost the regime’s immunity against American pressure by providing a homegrown kind of reform” (Essam El Din). Even in the current wave of demonstrations organized by the group calling on the government to abolish the emergency laws and affect constitutional reform, they maintain public support for the President. Earlier this year, Akef issued a statement saying that the MB would support a sixth term for
Mubarak promised the reforms they demand, and the Brotherhood has also said they would support the nomination of his son, Gamal Mubarak, with a guarantee of undertaking constitutional reform. Notwithstanding this general supportive stance towards the government, the MB’s recent demonstrations and activism for reform can be considered a departure from their usual conciliatory accommodationist stance. Therefore, even though they constitute the largest and most influential opposition group in the country and pose the greatest threat to the regime’s power, they have shown little desire to confront the government, except on essential issues of reform.

Perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of inclusion of the MB in the political process is their current stance on reform, detailed in their March 2004 reform initiative, and their active role in campaigning and mobilizing popular support for this cause. Thus by analyzing their reform initiative and their current endeavor to achieve such reform, a compelling case can be built in favor of legalizing the MB.

The MB’s March 2004 reform initiative tackles political, legal, social, economic and educational reform. It begins by stressing on the MB’s rejection of foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs and outside pressures to reform, stating the need for indigenous and authentic reform that derives from the framework of Islam (not from foreign values) and which recognizes the importance of knowledge and technology. The document reiterates the MB’s goal of developing and Islamizing the individual, the family and the government (“The Muslim…”). In the area of political reform the MB presented nineteen points, preceded by a statement that expresses their commitment to the system of government that exists in Egypt—as a republic with a constitutional, parliamentary system—and to democracy, all within the framework of Islamic values. Furthermore, they state their respect for international law and international agreements. The most important of these points are: that authority should be solely in the hands of the people, the nation being the source of legitimacy for any group, party or institution; that power should be rotated through free and fair elections; that religious freedom and the freedom to bear religious symbols should be safeguarded; that freedom of expression, opinion, the press and association ad the freedom to form political parties must be secured; that civil liberties, especially the right to demonstrate peacefully and the right of every citizen (male and female) to elect and be elected to parliament must be ensured; that the president’s authority and the number and length of term served must be limited and the independence of the executive branch of government must be maintained; that emergency laws and all other legislation that stifles political and civil liberties must be abolished and civil society must be allowed to operate without restrictions; and that all political prisoners must be released and the practice of torture be ceased (“The Muslim…”). The MB also stress the necessity of an independent judiciary and of limiting the mandate of military courts to military offenses only. The document also details several points pertaining to electoral reform including the need to remove the government and security forces from the electoral process and to place elections under the supervision of an independent council of judges selected by the Supreme Judicial Board in order to ensure the free, fair and legal elections. They also stress the right of candidates to freely launch campaigns and the right to freely use the media (“The Muslim…”).
As for economic reform, the document reiterates the group’s commitment to the freedom of economic activity and respect for private property. It states their belief in trade liberalization, in encouraging the private sector and reinvigorating privatization and in making good use of the revolution in information technology. The main points of reform pertaining to the economy are in regards to social security, encouraging investment and providing incentives, directing most of the sectors’ production towards basic and necessary goods, encouraging people to save and raising their awareness regarding the importance of saving for future generations, encouraging innovation, stressing quality control in production, supporting small and medium enterprises and encouraging exports (“The Muslim…”).

According to Mohamed Habib, deputy to the General Guide, the MB have based their reform on the concepts of justice and freedom and believe that reform should not be led by the government alone or one party, but should be associated with the nation as a whole. Thus, the MB advocates a nation-wide dialogue on the issue of reform and the formation of a reform council which represents the various political parties and groups in order to create a national movement for reform empowered to effect change. Habib also stresses the concepts of the rule of the majority, accountability of government to the people and separation of powers within the state (judicial, legislative and executive) as essential components of reform (Interview). He has reiterated the group’s belief that women have a right to contest elections and to hold high posts anywhere. Furthermore, the MB considers Copts an intrinsic part of the fabric of the Egyptian nation and as partners in the decisions and fate of the group and as citizens with equal rights and responsibilities as those of Muslims. Habib clearly stated that, should the MB be granted legal status, they would form a party open to all citizens, regardless of creed, who support their goals (Interview).

As Amy Hawthorne notes “the most detailed articulation of the moderate Islamic perspective to emerge from the current reform debate is found in the initiative published by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in March 2004” (“Political reform…” p.10). Through their reform initiative the group has demonstrated all the necessary characteristics, mentioned earlier, that qualify them as viable participants in the political process. They have demonstrated a commitment to democracy and free market economy with a concern for social justice. They have also displayed a strong concern for human rights by emphasizing the need to institute and safeguard the various essential freedoms and civil and political rights.

Furthermore, the group has assumed a very active role in the current reform drive. They have joined forces with the Egyptian Movement for Change, known as Kifaya, that combines various groups and ideologies under one goal: to call for constitutional reform, most important of which is the implementation of free multi-candidate presidential elections, to demand civil and political liberties and the abolishment of the emergency laws and to protest against a sixth term for President Mubarak. The MB undersigned the official statement of Kifaya outlining their demands, demonstrating the group’s willingness to join forces and enter alliances with parties and entities that differ greatly in
their ideologies to that of the MB. Describing Kifaya as a “secular-religious national alliance for reform”, Amr Hamazawy of Carnegie Endowment noted that “democratic opposition platforms are by far more effective with Islamist participation than without it” (“Challenges…”).

At such a crucial juncture in Egyptian politics where demands for more democratization are growing stronger and louder, the MB have proven themselves worthy of inclusion by joining the voices that call for civil and political liberties and the mechanisms that would preserve these rights and also by showing that they do not seek power for themselves. It is important to note that their recent activism and demands clearly demonstrate that they are seeking to institute the very safeguards that would prevent them from hijacking the democracy they are fighting so hard to realize and would also preclude any attempts on their part to establish theocratic, authoritarian rule.

Equally important is the need of Al-Wasat party, an offshoot of the MB which has been fighting for its recognition as a legal political party, to be recognized along with the MB. Formed of younger members who hold more moderate views than the MB’s old guards, it too demonstrates great potential as a viable participant in Egyptian politics. With “an Islamist leaning agenda similar to the Brotherhood’s” Al Wasat party boasts a number of Copt and female members. The party espouses a “civil political approach” with a “more modernist vision [that] tackles religion as a culture more than a holy text” (Shahine G.).

To conclude, the MB has proven themselves viable participants in the political process and active players in the reform drive. Their involvement in the political process has bred further accommodation and pragmatism, thus their inclusion will further help eliminate any radical or uncompromising attitudes amongst them. As Louay Safi notes, “in a society in which ideas are allowed to compete, extremism will be forced to move from center stage to the fringe of society, and moderate voices and practices will prevail” (“Democratic reform…”). Since the MB command substantial popular legitimacy and support, including them in the process of reform and democratization is essential to provide a large portion of the population with their preferred legal and recognized representation.

In the final analysis it should be said that the MB are a political force like any other and thus cannot be judged solely on its rhetoric and promises. After all they are active players in the political game and are apt politicians who, like all others in their position, are liable to lie and break promises. But the issue remains that for a fully-fledged democracy to take root in Egypt the MB and other Islamist movements (including the Al Wasat party) must be legally recognized. Indeed, inclusion is the only way to put the MB to the test in order to ascertain whether indeed they can deliver on all the promises they make - only then can they become fully accountable to their constituencies, and only then can they truly become a justifiable threat to the regime.
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