

Islamism after the Arab Spring

It makes no sense today to divide Arab politics into neatly crafted opposites, the 'Islamist' versus the 'civil democratic' blocs.

ASHRAF EL SHERIF

During the early euphoria of the Arab Spring, the secular disposition of the uprisings led some to argue, incorrectly, that Islamism is becoming an anachronism in North Africa. In fact, alongside the goals of democracy and social justice, religious symbolism was evident in the revolts. Demonstrations began after Friday prayers at mosques. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) played a prominent role in the protests, as did Al Nahda activists in Tunisia. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was closely involved in Tripoli's liberation.

Today, the coin has been flipped and many observers emphasize the Islamists' organizational competence as an advantage in the postrevolutionary context. Apprehensive secular political activists in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia now worry: How can we protect the Arab Spring's incipient democracies from Islamist takeover? After all, other countries that have undergone revolutionary turmoil have experienced moments when the fruits of rebellion fell into the hands of the most organized and determined political factions.

Yet Islamism in North Africa is neither receding nor about to strangle democratic aspirations in their cribs. Secularist/Islamist dichotomies thrived under the long rule of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali—but it makes no sense today to divide Arab politics into neatly crafted opposites, the "Islamist" versus the "civil democratic" blocs.

Two trends shed light on possible trajectories for Islamist politics in North Africa after the Arab Spring. The first is a growing factionalism among moderate mainstream Islamists. Various Islamist parties are emerging, particularly in Egypt, manifesting class and generational divisions in addition to differences in social outlook, cultural sensibilities, and approaches to Islamic texts.

Many Islamist liberals are full-fledged democrats who are establishing ingenious new approaches to Islamist politics. However, the proliferation of new parties could hurt them electorally. And the incumbent mainstream—still peaceful and not extremist, yet more conservative—remains hesitant or unready to join reformist democratic Islamism.

We must wait for the current transition period to end before we can see this factionalism play out on a grand scale, as the

parties engage questions of socioeconomic policy and issues of democratic state building. And it remains to be seen which of the new Islamist parties will forswear contention over the Islamist/secularist divide, and where they will situate themselves within these countries' incipient democratic transitions in the battle between democratic and authoritarian politics.

The second trend is the participation of ex-radical Islamist groups in the democratic transition process. Such groups have established political parties to stand in Egyptian elections, engaged in peaceful political contestation and debate in Tunisia, and played an important role in the political and military war effort of the Libyan revolution.

Ex-militant Islamists are moderating politically and ideologically—and their conventional, dogmatic doctrine of total regime rejection, which led groups in Egypt and Libya toward a course of armed confrontation with governments, is gone with the wind. Today these groups are championing an Islamist discourse of opposition to political, economic, or social policies that, in their view, contradict Islamic law or do not serve the public.

Their commitment to democracy as a system, and to its concomitant pluralist political culture, remains questionable. This problem is of greater significance in Libya than in Egypt, given the role played by the LIFG in the revolutionary effort against Muammar el-Qaddafi, and the fact that this group has emerged from the civil war with considerable military strength and social influence.

Some analysts portray the 83-year-old MB as disconcerted about Egypt's unexpected political reconfiguration. But even if they were latecomers to the uprising, both the MB in Egypt and Al Nahda in Tunisia remain key beneficiaries of it. Both movements emerged from the upheaval with state recognition, and both have built bridges with other opposition forces. Decades-old ideological animosities were eclipsed somewhat by collaboration against a common enemy—the former regimes.

To be sure, a long-awaited secular democratic politics is in the making in North Africa. The middle-class youth who headed the protest movement are playing a greater role in Egyptian and Tunisian politics. Their ingenuity, secular sensibilities, and longing for good governance, democracy, and

human rights may well prove the backbone of an emerging non-Islamist bloc.

The youthful activists could coalesce around reformist factions within the state, as might liberal business groups, both of which will be keen on distancing themselves from the outdated oligarchic practices that characterized state-business relations under the old regimes. A surge in Egyptian labor militancy may also engender a center-left political bloc anchored in the trade union movement.

The Salafists' eagerness to establish hegemony over the Islamic public sphere is undercut by their political incompetence.

Democratization, however, could also enable democratic reformist Islamists to reach their longterm goals. In Egypt, competition for votes could prompt organizational and ideological reforms within the MB, which has often shown a savvy ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The use of Islamism as a bogeyman could finally be rendered ineffective, provided that Islamist factions recognize and adjust to the new political conditions.

Islamism in North Africa may be undergoing a dramatic transformation that will become more visible in coming years. Political struggle to defend countries' "Islamic identity" against secularists and Westernizers is becoming increasingly irrelevant to people's needs. Popular demands for good governance, economic development, and social empowerment are compelling Islamist politics to adapt and transcend its traditional concern with safeguarding Islamic identity. Or at least the identity discourse is being supplemented with socioeconomic and civic agendas that relate to the daily life and welfare of the people instead of talismanic ideologies of an "Islamic political order" and an "Islamic state."

Islamists in Disarray

Islamism is a broad category that includes diverse actors converging on the goal of creating a sociopolitical, legal, and economic order based on interpretations of Islam not only as a religion but also as a social and legal system. In Egypt today, in the wake of the revolt that toppled Mubarak, Islamists are splitting into incongruous sociopolitical and ideological factions. In fact, some Islamists can more easily find political bedfellows among non-Islamist movements than among their Islamist brethren. We can speak today of Islamist rightist movements, Islamist leftists, Islamist libertarians, Islamist communitarians, Islamist liberalism, and Islamist conservatism.

The MB itself has spawned multiple parties. In addition to the official MB party (the Freedom and Justice Party), three other MB parties are being established: Al Nahda (Renaissance), Al Reyada (Pioneers), and Al Tayar al-Masri (Egyptian Current) parties. Salafists, who pursue a literalist and puritanical approach to Islamic theology, have their own parties. Differences among

these factions are genuine and reflect not just old distinctions in ideological outlook but also variations along a new spectrum of Islamist politics.

MB factional politics, long viewed as pitting conservatives against reformists, is developing in new directions. Before the January uprising, major points of contention between the old guard and new guard primarily involved internal organization: decision-making rules, transparency and accountability, bylaws, grassroots representation, rotation of leadership figures, freedom of debate, and participation by women and youth. Since the regime's teeth were pulled, organizational contention still matters in the MB, but not as much.

Conservatives controlling the group's Guidance Bureau originally threw their lot behind Egypt's new rulers—that is, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)—in the hope that an orderly transition would grant the MB kingmaker status in parliamentary elections. The Islamist reformists have been more inclined to share with the secularist revolutionaries a politics of relentless pressure on the SCAF to implement reforms.

The Reformists

Reformists in the MB are a loosely defined category consisting of Islamist political pundits, public activists, civil society workers, student movement leaders, social media consumers, and community service workers. Differences in age, socioeconomic status, and occupation—often overlooked by analysts—are muted by a joint commitment to the values and processes of political modernity as reconciled with an open-minded approach to Islam.

The restless MB reformist youth are part of the "youth bulge" in Egyptian politics. It was they who drove older leaders to take part in the uprising, after an initial period of indeterminacy. Then a "we-did-it" euphoria encouraged many MB youths to join the ranks of the "permanent revolution" camp, which is pushing for comprehensive political and social transformation. Reformists believe that such youth fervor can be successfully incorporated into a modern Islamist party.

After the January revolt and the movement toward democracy, MB reformists, already discouraged by the leadership's indifference to their organizational concerns in recent years, started showing signs of discontent with the MB and its official Freedom and Justice Party's (FJP's) political profile. Key differences had to do with the FJP's less-than-revolutionary standpoint on questions of state reform, police and judiciary restructuring, deconstructing the regime's political networks and resources and, finally, the combustible issue of labor rights and strikes.

The MB Guidance Bureau and the FJP were reluctant to exert pressure on the SCAF or join forces with the disgruntled secular revolutionary forces that started taking to the streets again in popular demonstrations as early as April. Apparently, the MB old guard's conservatism prevented it from matching the revolutionary fervor of the organization's youthful reformist activists. In addition, the reformists criticized the top-down, elitist organization of the FJP. It was logical for disaffected MB voices to start looking for new political venues.

MB reformists are not very likely, despite various ideological commonalities with it, to join the veteran Islamic party Al Wasat (also known as the Center, formed in 1996 by a group of ex-MB activists), which has finally been licensed by court decision after 11 years of legal struggle. Still as elitist as ever, Al Wasat is more a highbrow cultural salon than a political party. Ten years of legal prohibition wrought damage to it that is reparable but nevertheless daunting, and it suffers from intellectual stagnancy, a peculiar problem considering the party's supposedly "modernist" posture. In the eyes of MB reformist youth, a more attractive solution is to establish their own MB reformist parties.

Striving to fashion themselves after the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, the MB reformist parties (Al Nahda, Pioneers, and Egyptian Current) are already formulating online and in print an advanced Islamist discourse on citizenship, good governance, development, human rights, gender, and civic participation. And they are insisting on keeping political activism entirely separate from the workings of proselytizing and religious groups.

MB reformists are tapping into the socioeconomic demands of a sullen, youthful labor force as well as wired and middle-class but relatively deprived yuppies—while drawing on their own good-governance ambitions (which were at the heart of the January revolt). They may shift toward a center-left position out of a desire for political feasibility and ideological reassessment.

In their platforms, MB reformist parties claim they would support community development, human rights, and civil society organization, instead of the talismanic metapolitics of the "Islamic state" and sharia. This would necessitate an all-encompassing ideological revision and imaginative rupture with traditions of Islamic learning, an already ongoing process launched by Islamist intellectuals in the 1980s. No less importantly, bridges with non-Islamist liberal and leftist political actors could help create a democratic front transcending identity politics demarcations.

The Old Guard

The Freedom and Justice Party, the "official" MB party dominated by conservatives, is attempting to preserve the organizational and political dominance of the group's leadership (the Guidance Bureau) over the party. This replicates the model of the Jordanian Islamic Action Front. The MB leadership claims that it wishes to maintain functional separation of the party and the parent organization. Nonetheless, it is widely expected that the MB will devise institutional devices to maintain control over the FJP. Informal and patriarchal power relations will be key. Party bylaws, still not officially endorsed, are expected to dodge issues of dual membership and leadership.

This is consequential. The MB Guidance Bureau is more than reluctant to alter its doctrine regarding the "totality" of Islam. The MB's self-image as "greater than a party and less than a state" remains a stubborn article of faith among its immovable leadership and also much of its grassroots. Functional differentiation between the MB and the political party can be achieved if tactically advantageous, which is evidently the case right now. But to dissolve all ties is raising the bar too high.

MB conservatives remain faithful to the Leninist traditions of vertical organization and iron discipline. The party today is acting like the MB's auxiliary or simply its political department.

The FJP needs the MB for its ability to add demographic depth and religious clout, while the MB needs the party to run the day-to-day political business and back the religious group politically. MB conservatives, in light of the Guidance Bureau's composition and financial machinations, are attentive to the worldview of the business oriented conservative bourgeoisie. Demands for a rationalized and pious market economy comport well with comparable agendas among business classes nationwide. Are we watching the rise of the Egyptian form of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (a coalition of pro-European Islamists, Anatolian businesspeople, and nationalist liberals escaping the calamities of the old center-right parties)?

Such a rise would prove action-packed. But MB conservatives, still representing the mainstream of this key political group, are held back by tactical considerations. They preferred compromising with the SCAF during most of the transitional period, to the dismay of other revolutionary partners. They opted to appease the SCAF with an eye toward an expected big win in parliamentary elections—a classic example of tactics replacing strategy. Focused on temporary political gains, the MB and its FJP are apparently not prioritizing the democratizing of state structures and state-society relations even though political wisdom suggests institutional reforms are prerequisites for the long-term success of a democratic transition.

MB leaders are reluctant to stake their position along lines of contention between democratic and authoritarian forces. A more familiar and easier battlefield for them is ideological polarization between Islamists and non-Islamists. This is a misfortune for the revolutionary process and for Islamist political development.

The Turkish Justice and Development Party, with its embrace of democratic pluralist politics, governance record, successes in municipalities and community services, and promotion of economic development, is a source of inspiration claimed by both Islamist conservatives and reformists. Controversy arises, however, when the prerequisites and conditions for the Turkish "Islamist success story" are brought up. Given the MB leadership's foot-dragging on issues such as separating politics from proselytizing and foregoing ideology in favor of good governance and economic development—not to mention the glaring contextual differences between Egypt and Turkey—a straightforward copy of the Turkish model by the MB is not likely.

Unprepared for Politics

And what of the Salafists? Their popularity in Egypt has been amply evident over the past two decades. They reflect a deeply rooted religious tendency—a desire to return to a "purer" form of Islam—that has been present on the Egyptian street for a long time. However, their bearing on today's reality should not be exaggerated. Salafists are relegated to troublemaker status, nothing more. They lack the organization, resourcefulness, political expertise, and mindset to translate their doctrinal steadfastness into meaningful political dividends, even within the Islamist camp.

Islamism may be undergoing a dramatic transformation that will become more visible in coming years.

Salafists remain faithful to their original mission to monopolize the Muslim religious public sphere and to deride all religious authorities save their own. For them, politics is operational only in this respect. Their approach is not a matter of artfulness or opportunism as much as a cognitive screen that does not permit comprehension of politics except in terms of spreading or conserving hegemony over the religious sphere.

The confident Salafists underestimate how confused they seemed in the aftermath of the revolt. The uprising contravened their teachings on ignoring politics and focusing on preaching, and it included substantial participation by members of the Salafist grassroots, in defiance of their clerics' fatwas. The revolt's politicization of wide segments of society shook the Salafists' once unshakable belief that their moment is yet to come.

In the final analysis, the Salafists' key rivals are the Islamist reformists. Salafists are aware of the greater clout that reformists might enjoy under a more democratic political system. Indeed, the balance of power within the all-important religious public sphere is subject to reconfiguration now in light of the newly empowered Islamist reformist actors. And Islamist reformist politics rests partially on challenging orthodox and conservative Islamic interpretations. Hence, after a decade of prolific proselytizing in the mass media, mosques, online social media, and on the ground, restructuring the religious sphere is the Salafists' worst nightmare.

Whatever can stop a reformist-led religious structural readjustment is tolerable to the Salafists. This would include deceitful politics, half-hearted support of revolutionary goals, compromising with the SCAF's style of rule, forming alliances with the counterrevolutionary forces of business oligarchies and the security establishment, and certainly exploiting their Saudi connections.

Since the revolt, the Salafists through both their political parties and religious networks have disseminated a mix of scorching propaganda and populist ideas designed to reinvigorate identity politics and foment sectarian strife. Concurrently, they have acted as provocateurs, decrying secular liberalism as blasphemous and alien, and its Egyptian adherents as "cultural stooges of the West."

Salafism nevertheless is gradually losing ground to politicized Islam, whether in its reformist or conservative versions. As political actors, Salafists have hardly any experience with electoral politics: cadre building, resource mobilization, and interest aggregation techniques. Their mobilizing capabilities are hyped, but their past successes have relied less on sound organization than on exploiting public emotions and prejudices. Egypt's new political atmosphere is pushing the Salafists into unfamiliar territory, and their eagerness to establish hegemony over the Islamic public sphere is undercut by their political incompetence.

Islamist reformists are establishing ingenious new approaches to politics.

Militants' Makeover

The loud voices of the MB and Salafist movements amid the Egyptian revolt have drawn attention away from another Islamist movement that bests any other local Islamist actor in terms of achieving ideological revisions and organizational remodeling. This is the Gama'a Islamiyya, or Islamic Group—an organization traditionally dedicated to the forcible overthrow of the government and its replacement with an Islamic state.

Though relatively small, the Islamic Group is an interesting experiment in the Islamist laboratory, one in which an aviolent movement is naturalized socially and politically, albeit while trying to keep its organizational and ideological character intact. For the sake of analysis one can identify two factions: revisionists and militants.

The revisionists, led by Nageh Ibrahim, are writing new chapters in Islamist self-critique and reorientation. Ibrahim believes that Islamists do not monopolize representations of Islam and argues that self-critique is a forgotten Islamist duty. Literalist scripturalism is dismissed. He calls for reforming state religious institutions, long subjugated by the Mubarak regime, to promote peaceful and non-coercive proselytizing, preaching, and dialogue. He wants the institutions to lobby the government, to make sure Islamic cultural and social values are respected in the state media and in educational and artistic discourse. But on questions of cooperation with liberals, peaceful action versus violence, and the role of the state and rule of law, Ibrahim and his followers are Islamist pioneers.

The militants are led by Mohammed Essam Derbala, the new head of the Islamic Group. Their theoretical discourse on political participation may not be very distant from that of the revisionists, but they have positioned themselves in the authoritarian camp that disavows further radicalization in protests and further confrontation with the SCAF. However, whether they are proud of their violent past or not, the militants do expressly repudiate violence now. And while they ridicule party activism in the past, they have established a party called Building and Development, which will participate in legislative and local elections.

No Call to Arms

In Tunisia, the Al Nahda Party leadership has historically had a more liberal outlook than Egypt's MB. In 1981, Al Nahda was the region's first Islamist movement to declare its full commitment to the values of democracy, multiparty politics, and pluralism. It cannot afford ideological intransigence in a society that is among the most modern, literate, and educated in the Arab world. As a result, the party does not face the prospect of splintering that the MB does.

No less important, secularist political forces in Tunisia are far more potent than in Egypt. Traditions of political and civil society organization in secular forums such as the Tunisian

labor movement have proved effective, not just during the mass mobilization of the revolt but also in the transition period. Unlike in Egypt, Tunisians created a transitional civilian administration to prepare for the election of a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. Secularist political forces are present and vocal in the administration and their voices will be heard in crafting a national charter. Egyptian secularists, by contrast, fear that Islamists will write the new constitution by virtue of their expected strength in the new parliament, which will appoint a constitution writing committee.

Al Nahda has rebuilt an extensive and efficient party organization nationwide, which in October elections helped it win a plurality of seats in the constituent assembly. But party leaders, while articulating Islam-inspired values, have highlighted their commitment to Tunisia's modernist achievements, as well as their willingness to work in coalition governments with the secularist center-leftist parties.

Islamists in Tunisia, most notably Salafists and the jihadist Islamic Liberation Party, are not likely to make much noise—they are past their prime. Tunisian Salafists, influenced through strong Saudi connections, will probably retain the ultraconservatism that has brought them into alliances with the most unscrupulous factions of the former regime, including the security agencies and oligarchic businessmen. In a healthier political system, this would be an invitation to irrelevancy. As for jihadist groups, their already limited base of support is expected to shrink further with the dwindling popularity of jihad and Islamist militancy as a model of change in the Middle East.

Libya's Revisionists

In Libya, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group has implemented important doctrinal and organizational revisions over the past decade, after the model of Islamist counterparts in Egypt. Lengthy books have explicated the new doctrine, dismissing violence against innocent people as religiously forbidden and politically immoral and unconstructive. Excommunicating people and apostatizing regimes are wrong, according to the new religious interpretations. Instead, the LIFG emphasizes gradualism, renewal, realistic concerns, good manners, high demeanor, jurisprudence, flexibility, and escaping rigid scripturalism.

Among the key promoters of these revisions was Abdel Hakim Belhaj, who emerged later as one of the Libyan revolutionary war leaders—he was in charge of the Tripoli liberation operation. Other Islamist groups, most notably the Libyan

MB and Salafists, maintained an active profile during the revolution. The Salafists, particularly popular in Libya's eastern cities, manned most of the armed groups that carried out the bulk of the revolutionary fighting. The MB placed two members in Libya's National Transitional Council.

Many fear that the liberal façade of the transitional council is irrelevant in light of Islamist domination on the ground. This explains Belhaj's incessant messages of appeasement both to the Libyans and the West. He worked on the LIFG's latest revisions and was quick to deny holding any grudges against the West, despite his own rendition during the US-led war against terror after 9/11. According to Belhaj, the LIFG's "new Islamism" is a democratic popular project in contradistinction to elitist secularism. He has highlighted the national character of the Libyan revolution, Islamic legitimacy, and the feasibility of party activism under a new, fair, and just political system.

It is unclear yet whether the LIFG will operate as a political party in post-Qaddafi Libya. For any integration of Islamism into the political process to succeed, Islamists would need to endorse republicanism, democracy, pluralism, and constitutional rule. But no less important is the willingness and ability of the LIFG, the Salafists, and the MB to develop their discourses and act in accordance with political realities in Libya, which are very different from the situation in Egypt and Tunisia.

Libyan peculiarities include a deep tribal structure, a failed state, crippled bureaucracy, regional animosities, Western influence resulting from aid to the revolutionaries, and the all-important issue of oil-revenue allocation. The first adaptability test is coming soon. Once the state-building process starts, will the LIFG and other armed groups disarm and incorporate their militias into the national army? This is only one of many questions facing Islamic movements in Libya and elsewhere as they redefine themselves, summon new strategies, and set out on new courses in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Critical Thinking

1. Why do you think the LIFG is so focused on doctrinal and organizational revisions? Do you think these revisions are necessary? Why or why not?

2. How do you think the LIFG's approach to Islamism will affect the future of Libya? Do you think it will be a positive or negative influence? Why or why not?