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Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

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Published by Leuven University Press

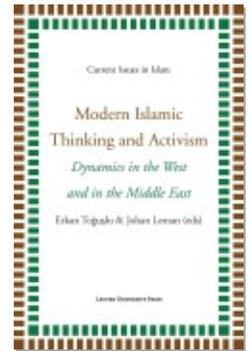
Toğuşlu, Erkan and Johan Leman.

Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism: Dynamics in the West and in the Middle East.

Leuven University Press, 2014.

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CHAPTER 7

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Democratic Experience in Egypt

Roel Meijer

Introduction

The Egyptian Spring seems to be in limbo. It has taken a zigzag course over the past two years. The Muslim Brotherhood has played a special role; joining belatedly on 28 January, but saving the revolution from defeat, but then working mostly alone. Having won the general elections in January 2011 it believed to have the first step to gaining power, but then on 14 June the Supreme Constitutional Court declared that the earlier parliamentary elections were illegal and that parliament should be dissolved. Three days later the Egyptians chose the leader of the party of the Muslim Brotherhood Muhammad Mursi as their new president, while the Brotherhood had promised before not to take part in the presidential elections. But even before the results were announced the military had limited his powers.

Aside from the continuous struggle with the Egyptian military and the tactics of the Brotherhood, the question is what the Muslim Brotherhood will do the coming years? Is there a line in the policy of the Brotherhood or is it simple political opportunism? For example, what does it mean if the Brotherhood claims to have won the general elections in December-January on the basis of “the will of the people” (*iradat al-sha‘b*)? In short what does ‘politics’ mean for the Brotherhood?

These questions are also relevant for the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe because the Brotherhood is viewed with particular skepticism there. Since the 1990s the Brotherhood has been portrayed as power-hungry, opportunistic

and willing to speak with a forked tongue, a radical one for its followers, and a moderate one for the European audience. All of this just to gain power. In French this called “*le double langage*”. Is this also the case in Egypt?

My argument is that one of the problems with the Brotherhood is not that it mingles religion with politics but that in the past it has not embraced the political sufficiently (Meijer 2012). It is still to a large extent a religious movement, that has included politics as one option. After the fall of Mubarak it has been unable to reform itself quick enough and fell back on its old proven exclusivist strategy of “going alone” or *Alleingang*.¹ It did establish a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) during the first year of the revolution, but it was unable to make a long-term coalition with other political groups and form a broad social movement to sustain the so-called Revolution of 25 January as these might jeopardize its vested interests. Only when it suited its own interests of putting pressure on the military did the Brotherhood enter Tahrir and form coalitions with other groups. In the end it depended on its own organization, the *Tanzim*, and alienated potential allies.

The lessons for Europe are difficult to make. As several researchers have pointed out, it is extremely difficult for the Brotherhood to implement the same hierarchical organization in Europe as in the Middle East, (Roald 2012) and the Muslim Brotherhood is a loose web of European and national organizations (Vidino 2010).

Liberalizing the Muslim Brotherhood

The biggest problem with the Muslim Brotherhood is that when the revolt started at the end of January 2011 it was in the process of reform. This process had been going on for decades. Since its founding in 1928 its slogans had been Islam is “a total system” (*al-nizam al-kamil*), “Islam is all-encompassing” (*shumuliyya*), and “Islam is state and religion” (*al-islam al-din wa-l-dawla*), since the end of the 1970s this was changing. The totalitarian pretensions were gradually crumbling and realism started to gain the upper hand over utopia.² As the claims to the Truth diminished, more room was created for internal debates, and working together and forming coalition with other groups became possible. Party politics, previously discarded as a threat to the “unity of the *umma*” and leading to a “degenerate political system”, was becoming increasingly accepted as a means---besides *da’wa*---to transform society. In 1984 the Brotherhood for

the first time took part in general elections, after it had accepted the notion of “partyism” (*hizbiyya*).³ Until the fall of Mubarak it would participate in eight elections, winning 88 seats in 2005.

It was especially the next generation of the rising new generation of leaders in the Brotherhood who supported parliamentary democracy and believed in greater openness. Well-educated and much more worldly than the older generation who had known the founder Hasan al-Banna personally, they wanted to transform the Brotherhood into a broad centrist political party, and separate the movement from the political party. The remarks that the French sociologist Olivier Roy made at the time that political Islam revolves around virtue and piety and “the rest of sin, plot and illusion” no longer applied when he wrote these words in 1992 (Roy 1992: 27).

One of the major Islamist presidential candidates, Abd al-Mun‘aym Abu al-Futuh, who lost in the first round but received 18% of the votes is a good example of this generation, which has experienced a metamorphosis in this period, transforming from radical pietism to political realism.⁴ In many respects they are comparable to the left-wing intellectuals of the 1960s in Europe that evaluated from Marxism to social-democracy.

These changes did not however take place without struggle. The General Guide at the time Mustapha Mashhour still was able in the 1990s to declare that the Christian minority the Copts would be treated as *dhimmis* in the new Islamic order if it were established (El-Ghorbashi 2005). But the outcry that these words provoked within the movement indicated that things were changing.

At the beginning of this century this reform process accelerated. The political program the Brotherhood published in 2006 is usually regarded as the most liberal document until that moment. The document underwrites for the first time numerous liberal rights, such as the freedom of speech, organization, independence of the judiciary, separation of powers, and defense of human rights. As Asef Bayat has argued before, this is part of post-Islamist trend of claiming rights instead of. But I would argue that it is more. It is part of a larger process to accept politics. For the first time the Brotherhood is accepting politics as a process.

This is apparent in the way the faction in parliament was building a reputation as a constructive opposition becoming adept at parliamentary work. Not so much the implementation of the *sharia* or the veiling of women were the major themes. Rather, concrete politics, such as revealing corruption and combating

poverty, were some of the topics with which the Brotherhood tried to discredit the Mubarak regime.

In this manner the Muslim Brotherhood represented what is the most prominent aspect of the uprising against Mubarak: the unprecedented politicization of the public and the primacy of politics. After decades of the ‘politics of identity’ and symbolism, politics really had something to say. It dealt with rights, concrete demands, programs. In short, it touched upon the fundamental relations between citizen and state. Egyptians had become aware of the relations between corruption, the huge expansion of the police state, and the unprecedented enrichment of the clique around the sons of Mubarak and the deterioration of public services and impoverishment of the people. The Brotherhood had contributed to this rise of political consciousness, to the extent that even members of the Brotherhood had become embarrassed by the populist rhetoric of its electoral slogan “Islam is the solution”.

Tanzim

The question is to what extent the embracement of the political has been made by the movement as a whole. Despite the new tendencies within the movement it had retained its authoritarian and secretive structure---called the *Tanzim* (the “Organization”).⁵ The *Tanzim* duplicated the state in all respects. The General Guide acted as president, the Maktab al-Irshad (politburo) as cabinet of ministers and the Majlis al-Shura as a parliament. It retained the same divisions as the state, and penetrated the state except for the military and the police.

In itself the existence of the *Tanzim* is not remarkable. When the Brotherhood was established and experienced its rapid growth in the 1930s and 1940s, this was the worst period of totalitarian political ideologies and hierarchical disciplinary forms of organization. The cell structure, or “family” (*usra*) system, that the Brotherhood had adopted from the Communists still constitutes the backbone of the movement.⁶ According to this system an aspiring member has to spend six years in training before a normal member. Ideologically this discipline is legitimized on the Quranic principle of “hearing and obeying” (*al-sam‘ wa-l-ta‘a*). All new members, and when a new General Guide is appointed, all members have to pledge their allegiance (*bay‘a*) to the new leader.⁷

Ultimately, the *Tanzim* allowed the Brotherhood to survive sixty years of dictatorship and semi-authoritarian rule (1952-2011). The major problem was

that when the Mubarak regime fell, the *Tanzim* as a closed organization posed a threat to democracy and was outdated. Like in the Communist parties, it were not the creative intellectuals but the apparatchiks who ruled the movement. The present leader Muhammad Badi, Khayrat al-Shater as well as Muhammad Mursi are the embodiment of the *Tanzim*.⁸

Ambivalence

In the new more opener democratic political context after the fall of Mubarak the *Tanzim* became as much an asset as a liability. Not everyone was happy with the closed structure that worked like a state within the state and was a semi-clandestine organization that was still illegal but was tolerated. Since the new parliament convened for the first time on 23 January 2012, legislators have protested against the illegal status of the Brotherhood and the secrecy of the *Tanzim*. MPs have demanded that it be registered as a NGO and that it should come under the scrutiny of the Ministry of Social Affairs.⁹ They feared the power of the movement. But its power was ambiguous.

Due to its strict discipline the *Tanzim* was like no other organization able to mobilize large numbers of people during the 18 days of Tahrir demonstrations and sit-ins in January-February 2011. The *Tanzim* also enabled the Brotherhood to play a crucial role in the struggle with the military during the rest of the year.

On the one hand, the Brotherhood wanted to weaken the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF). For that purpose it called out its troops in May and in July and August and again in November. When in October the military opened fire on peacefully demonstrating Copts outside Maspero, the Brotherhood has exactly where it wanted SCAF: they were losing rapidly their popularity because they had reneged on their promise not to fire on the population when they had evicted Mubarak.

On the other hand, the Brotherhood needed SCAF to achieve its main purpose. When immediately after fall of Mubarak it became clear that free elections would be held it formulated its primary goal: winning the general elections that would be held (eventually) in December/January 2011-2012. Already on 14 February, three days after the fall of Mubarak, it announced its intention to found a political party (al-Hayat 2011:5). On 2 May it presented the new leadership of the FJP. Convinced that the party would win the elections, because the other groups were in disarray and did not have the organizational capacity the Brotherhood had in the form of the *Tanzim*, the Brotherhood formulated a majority strategy to grab as many seats in parliament as possible.

This did not mean that the Brotherhood no longer supported the protests on Tahrir Square; it only supported them when it served its own purpose to weaken SCAF and secure a majority in parliament. In order to limit the chances that its troops would become embroiled in violent encounters with the police and the military, it ordered its members to refrain from taking part in “open (permanent) sit-ins” and return home. Cooperation with other groups remained restricted.

It is true the Brotherhood did make concessions to its critics to change its provocative slogans “Islam is the solution” into “in the interests of Egypt”. And by officially striving for the establishment of a “civil state” (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*) instead of a “religious state” (*al-dawla al-diniyya*), but the restriction that it would be within the parameters of “religious sources” (*al-marjaʿiyya al-diniyya*) seemed to limit these concessions.¹⁰ Highly religious remarks by its leaders which seemed to contradict the more liberal interpretation did nothing to assuage the fears of the liberals, Copts and democrats who feared the power of the Brotherhood and were highly suspicious of its majority strategy.

The result was that the Brotherhood acquired a bad reputation among the Tahrir youth groups as well as established parties and liberals who at first were willing to give the movement a chance after years of repression by the Mubarak regime. It seemed as if the Brotherhood was constantly taking away with one hand what it had given with the other. Its reputation of being opportunistic and power hungry was fed by its renegeing on earlier promises to take only limited part in general elections and not to take part in presidential elections. Among secularists, it lost its last vestiges of reputation when it announced in March 2012 that it would taken part in the presidential elections.

However, despite the growing unease with Brotherhood, its majority strategy seemed at first to have been brilliantly successful. Due to the superb organization of the *Tanzim* the FJP gained 235 seats in parliament (47% of the votes). Together with the much more doctrinaire Salafi Nour Party the Islamists won 75% of the parliamentary seats and the liberals and secularists were decimated. These results seemed to underline the Brotherhood’s claims that it represented the “will of the people” (*iradat al-shaʿb*).¹¹

Representing the *volonté générale* – and not the will of God (although some leaders were not able to discern the difference) – seemed to dovetail nicely with its strategy to inherit the Revolution of 25 January by means of winning the general elections.

In hindsight the majority strategy should however be regarded as a major mistake. Had the Brotherhood understood what the Revolution of 25 January

had been about? Had not the fundamental distrust of power, authority, hierarchy, and the return of the political driven the youth at Tahrir to protest against Mubarak? And had not the old-fashioned hegemonic thinking been replaced ideological pluralism and horizontal activism? Moreover: did the Brotherhood not highly exaggerate its own power by claiming to represent the *volonté générale*? Must people regarded the normal support base of the Brotherhood at 25% of the population and certainly not the majority.

Critique

Critique of the majority strategy of the Brotherhood – or what the famous American commentator Fareed Zakaria calls “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 2003) – was enhanced by the fact that the Brotherhood also internally sinned against the new trend that had manifested itself at Tahrir. At an early stage the more critical and liberal figures in the Brotherhood, like Abd al-Mun’aym Abu al-Futuh, had been thrown out of the politburo, or had even been evicted from the movement.

It is interesting to glance at the alternative route he had envisioned for the Brotherhood. Abd al-Mun’aym Abu al-Futuh’s goal had been to establish multi-religious, conservative but democratic religious political party, comparable to the Christian Democratic parties. When when the politburo of the Muslim Brotherhood decided to appoint the leadership of the FJP from its own ranks this option was clearly buried.¹²

When members of the Brotherhood were not only forbidden to vote for other parties than the FJP but also were not allowed to establish their own parties, it was clear that the democratic-centralism of the Brotherhood had prevailed and that any democratic alternative had been dismissed. All political reform was submitted to gaining political power.¹³

As a result, a second exodus occurred, this time an important section of the Brotherhood youth no longer accepted the slavish principle of “hearing and obeying” and rejected and left the movement in June 2011.

All these groups that have left the Brotherhood have evolved where the Brotherhood had left off in its ideological evolution. With them the implementation of the *sharia* hardly plays a role anymore.¹⁴ Politics has emancipated itself from religion and become a field of activity in itself. Although not overt secularists, this forms an important step towards secularization of politics. According to the youth, politics should be based on civil rights, equality (*masawa*), and recognition of “pluralism” (*ta’addudiyya*), “recognition of

difference” and freedom of the individual to make choices. They make a clear distinction between politics that is meant combat the authoritarian state and religion which is a non-political field and should not be mixed.

Abd al-Munaym Abu al-Futuh’s programme is, for instance, based on terms such as “tolerance”, “openness”, “dialogue” with other political groups and religions.¹⁵ According to him a Copt and a women can become president. The same applies to former Brotherhood youth groups who have organized themselves in the Egyptian Current (al-Tayyar al-Masri) and refuse to call themselves an Islamic party.¹⁶ They regard religion more as an ethical code rather than religion of minute rules that has relevance for politics.

Especially in tactical and organizational respect these groups differed from the Muslim Brotherhood. Whereas the Brotherhood held its lines closed, they were prepared to work together with other groups and to take part in “open sit ins” and refused to be bullied by the *Tanzim*, regarding their “allegiance to the nation more important than the allegiance to the *Tanzim*”.¹⁷ They criticized the Brotherhood for being undemocratic and not separating politics from *da’wa*.¹⁸ Insofar they took part in the elections they joined the Socialist People’s Alliance.

None of this means that the liberals had completely disappeared with in the Brotherhood. Leaders like Muhammad al-Biltagi succeeded in challenging party discipline. He appeared on Tahrir even against the wish of the General Guide and dared to say that sharia was totally irrelevant for day-to-day politics and the solution of the major problems Egypt faced. On the other hand, their weight declined as their words were almost immediately undermined by the actions of the political leadership.

Constituent Assembly

Eventually the majority strategy of the Brotherhood was the most damaging to themselves. Nowhere was this more apparent than during the issue of the Constituent Assembly. Nowhere did the ambiguity and shortsightedness of the Brotherhood become recognizable for liberals and alienate them.

The drawing up of a new constitution was justifiably seen as the major challenge of the new regime after the fall of Mubarak. Liberals like Mohamed al-Baradai, the former director of the International Nuclear Agency (?) in Vienna, argued in favor of speedy installation of the Constituent Assembly in order mark the new era and establish the basic rules of a new democratic system. He and all those in support of a revolutionary change believed that the new constitution should be in place before general elections and presidential were held.

This was for the liberals the chance to provide Egypt with a liberal constitution that would lay down civil rights, equality before law, freedom of expression and organization, freedom of religion, independence of the judiciary, the division of power between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary.

Only the Muslim Brotherhood opposed this move and blocked this opportunity. It made a deal with the military to support a revision of the existing constitution of 1971 of eight articles that were necessary to allow for a free parliamentary and presidential elections. About such crucial issues as the powers of the president and the relations between parliament and the executive the revision did not say anything. The Brotherhood supported the campaign to vote in favor of the amendments during the referendum held on 17 March 2011, which passed with 77% of the votes. At the end of March SCAF issued the Constitutional Declaration that contained far more revisions than the referendum.

The Brotherhood also supported the Constitutional Declaration of 30 March 2011 although the military had added their own amendments. The reason was probably that it contained the by now notorious art. 60 that stipulated that “parliament will choose the Constituent Assembly”.

During the period preceding the elections liberals would make several attempts to revise art. 60 and have the Constituent Assembly appointed by an independent body in order to make it representative of the country as a whole. Their attempts became all the more insistent as it became apparent that the Brotherhood would win the general elections. In the summer of 2011 a campaign “the Constitution First” was launched, but it was opposed by the Brotherhood and Salafis with the argument that a man-made constitution can never prevail over the *shari‘a*.

The Brotherhood was able to undermine these attempts when it became clear that liberals were increasingly willing to make concessions to SCAF and allow the military certain privileges in return for a liberal constitution guaranteeing individual rights. This became clear in the autumn of 2011, just prior and during the first phase of the elections, with the Ali Silmi plan. Ali Silmi was the Wafdist vice-Prime Minister who had drawn up a document, the “Principles of the Constitution” that reflected this liberal-military deal, allowing the military their privileges and control over their budget in exchange for liberal rights. The Brotherhood however torpedoed this project with the argument that it allowed SCAF to remain in place. In order to block it the Brotherhood mobilized its troops to protest at Tahrir. It withdrew, however, when the clash with the military escalated into violence at Muhammad Mahmud Street and Qasr al-Ayni

in November 2011. It let the Tahrir youth groups do the fighting against SCAF, being the primary beneficiary of the violence and the weakening of SCAF.

The last episode in this constitutional battle occurred when the Brotherhood had won the general elections in January 2012. As predicted the Brotherhood, reneging again on its promise not to go for a majority, Insisted with the Salafis on appointing the majority of the members of the Constituent Assembly. In response the liberals went to court and on 10 April the administrative court declared the Constituent Assembly illegal because “it did not represent the different sections of the Egyptian people.

From these examples, it is clear that though its majority policy the Brotherhood in the end lost everything. By alienating since the electoral victory in January almost everybody, ranging from liberals, leftists, liberal Islamists, and even Salafis, the Brotherhood allowed the military to revive the forces in support of the Mubarak regime, play on the fears of the liberals act and disband parliament.

Conclusion

Events since the early summer have been as surprising as the previous one and a half years. Less than a month after having been elected in June 2012 Mursi fired head of SCAF Muhammad al-Tantawi. These developments confirm the previous trend: politics determines the future of the Muslim Brotherhood. This also means that the Brotherhood has learned from its mistakes of pursuing a majority strategy. After Mursi only attained 24,9% during the first round of the presidential elections the Brotherhood knew it was in trouble and had to draw in wider support and make wider coalitions in order to prevent Ahmad Shafiq from winning the elections. Although it was largely unsuccessful, it did win enough support to prevent the old regime from winning the elections. This was a wake-up call. When Mursi became president he announced that he would be president for all Egyptians. Much of this is rhetoric, but the Brotherhood has realized its popularity can plummet if it does not comply with the laws of politics instead of ideology. This process had started thirty years earlier.

What does this mean for Europe? Of course we do not know the immediate effects, but in the long run it can have important implications. One, the more realistic (political) the Brotherhood becomes the more it will be accepted by Europe and the less ideologically it will respond to its leadership. Second, the more it tries to be a political party and the less it is a religious movement, the

greater the chances of becoming a broad political party that can attract different adherents across religious divides. Third, the more it adheres to the rules of the political game and does not try to impose its views, the less it will provoke opposition. In the end, if the transition to a normalization of the political system is achieved, it could have a positive effect on Islam in Europe. The Brotherhood, like the Ennahda Party in Tunisia, has experienced, long years of oppression. Its inclusion into the political process will hopefully also enhance its gradual transition to a political movement or party, which in the end will also lead to a process of internal democratization. In that case the need for the *Tanzim* is no longer felt.

Notes

- 1 This is a major precondition for the success of any social movement and explains why the coalition of Tahrir fell apart so quickly after the fall of Mubarak.
- 2 The trend is to regard that Islamism has reached a post political stage. I argue that in fact it has become increasingly political. For more on Roel Meijer (2009: 25-28, 34-37).
- 3 For more on the transition in the 1980s and 1990s see Roel Meijer (2012: 293-319).
- 4 Abd al-Mun'aym Abu al-Futuh has written his memoirs in which he describes his early years as a member of the Gama'at al-Islamiyya. Journalists often confuse this very broad movement with the later movement that came into conflict with the state. (Meijer 2009)
- 5 For more on the *Tanzim*, see Hussam Tamam (2006).
- 6 For the earlier period, see the description in Mitchell.
- 7 Membership of the Brother differs. According the former member Sameh al-Barqy estimates its membership at one million. As each member is expected to pay 8% of his salary to the movement, and estimated yearly income of the members is around 12,000 Egyptian pounds, the Brotherhood would have a yearly income of 1 billion Egyptian pounds. Others estimate the numbers between 40,000 and 50,000 members with between 400,000 and 500,000 sympathizers. For more on this theme, see "Muslim Brotherhood Operating Outside the Law? *Egypt Independent*, 16 February 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/muslim-brotherhood-operating-outside-law>, and Khalil Inani, "The Embattled Brothers," *Egypt Independent*, 19 April, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/783431>. Hussam Tamam, believed the *Tanzim* consisted of between 100,000 and half a million members, Hussam Tamam, *Tabawwulat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, p. 9.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 "Muslim Brotherhood Operating Outside the Law? *Egypt Independent*, 16 February 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/muslim-brotherhood-operating-outside-law>

- 10 The ambiguity has also been pointed by others. For more see the excellent paper by Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway (2006).
- 11 Its General Guide, Muhammad Badi'
- 12 *al-Masry al-Yaum*, maart 11, <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=290166&IssueID=2071>
- 13 *al-Masry al-Yaum*, 29 March 2011, <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=291935&IssueID=2089>. See also *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 30 maart, (hc). P. 10.
- 14 This applies to Abd al-Mun'aym Abu al-Futuh, see the long interview with him where he said the sharia was already being applied, *al-Masry al-Yaum*, 22 januari 2012, <http://www.25yanayer.net/?p=27188>
- 15 *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 30 maart, (hc). P. 10.
- 16 Lang Interview met al-Qassas, 13 november, <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/newsanalysis/special-folders-pages/new-egypt/egypt-after-the-january-25/135090-2011-11-13-11-47-12.html>
- 17 *Al-Masry al-Yaum*, 1 april, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/381912>
- 18 *al-Yaum al-Sabi'*, 21 juni 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=439866>. Zie ook de meningen van Muhammad Qassas over deze issues: Muhammad Qasas, *al-Dustur*, 11 april 2011, <http://www.dostor.org/opinion/11/april/26/40815>

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