

The Muslim Brotherhood: A Challenge or Opportunity for New Egypt?

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During the January Revolution in Egypt many Middle Eastern experts had two major questions in their mind. The first question was that what Mubarak's decision would be against the demonstrations. Would he give up or continue despite the wide opposition against his authority? The answer came on 11th February and Mubarak resigned by leaving the country to the Egyptian army. The second major question during this revolution was that what the behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood which is the largest opposition group in the country would be. This question is important because even though the Muslim Brotherhood has always been the leading opposition movement against oppressive Egyptian governments, there have been suspicious views about their intentions because of their Islamic character. Would they consider this revolution as a way to create an Islamic regime?

Would they just support the democratic reforms in the country and accept to live under a secular democracy? In this text the history and goals of the Muslim Brotherhood will be explained briefly.

History

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB-Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn) was established by Hasan Al-Banna in Egypt in 1928. Initially, the community was assumed as a social organization whose main concern was an apolitical religious reform in the society. Even though the community put its efforts on expanding Islamic values throughout the society, the effect of Palestinian events in 1930s and opposition against British colonial hegemony forced the MB to develop a political disclosure. Because of their political views and opposed stance, their activities were banned by the government but in the



chaotic atmosphere of the World War II they accelerated their efforts and reached thousands of people. Indeed, during that time a branch of the movement got armed to protect their leaders from state oppression. After the war, the movement was dissolved by the government because of their violent policy [1].

When Nasser took over the country, he assumed the MB as a major threat against his authority and put a tremendous pressure over the members of the community. For that reason, during Nasser's period, the community continued its activities secretly. The MB began to gain power in Egypt after the death of Nasser. During 1970s with the re-entrance to political arena the organization began to transform its political attitudes. They left the violent policies and began to follow a more moderate policy which aimed to participate to the political system and expand their influence within the system. This policy showed itself in 1984 elections in which the MB joined in a coalition with Wafd party. In this election the MB got only 8 seats. In 1987 they made another alliance with Labor party and gained 36 seats. By joining to the independent candidates, the MB won 1 seat in 1995 elections, 17 seats in 2000 elections and 88 seats in 2005 elections.

Long Term-Short Term Strategies

Leaving the violent politics is the turning point for the organization. The moderation of political ideas differed them from other radical Islamic movements within the society. But leaving the violent politics did not change their aim to create an Islamic government and Islamic society. For that reason, their strategic goals can be evaluated under two main topics: the short term goals and the long term goals.

The MB's short term goal basically is to gain the people's support and take the control of the government. In this short term plan the democracy has a crucial role. Being under an authoritarian system, the only way for the MB to reach the political power is to use democratic elections. For that reason rather than opposing the entire system, they try to integrate to it. From this perspective they prefer to leave the radical ideas of Sayyid Qutb, who was an influential extremist, and began to follow the moderate thinkers.

Under the light of moderate Islamic thinkers they developed a combination of Islam and democracy. In other words they interpret the democracy in an Islamic view. Within this concept they define democracy;

"...as (1) broad, equal citizenship with (2) binding consultation of citizens with respect to governmental personnel and policies, and (3) protection of citizens from arbitrary state action" [2]

As seen in the definition they have a democracy concept which pivots around the citizenship. Their main concern is to expand equal rights within the society and end the arbitrary behavior of the authoritarian state.



Muslim Brotherhood

Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn

MB's democratic demands can be seen more detailed in their 15 principles which were declared in 1990s. With these principles they declared that the only acceptable power source is the consent of the people. Any other sources cannot be considered legitimate. In addition the principles include a broad freedom demand which consists religion, speech, demonstration, political participation and representation. Moreover they demand a separation between prosecution and investigation powers. By regarding that the MB is a banned organization, it can obviously be seen that these demands are targeted to ensure MB's right to participate in the political arena. Another main demand in these principles is a free and fair election. Besides ensuring their position in political arena, they want to access the political authority by a free and

fair election because they always have had problems with government before previous elections [3][4].

These demands mostly are characteristics of a Western type democracy. From this perspective it can be easily said that the MB wants to promote democracy against an authoritarian government. On the other hand the MB accepts these demands because for them they are compatible with Islamic values. Moreover they see democracy as a part of Islam. In other words by supporting democratic values they do not move away from Islam [5].

By looking at their 15 principles, the MB can be assessed as an organization which desires to promote democracy in an authoritarian state. But when the long term goals of the organization are considered, it is obviously seen that they want to create an Islamic state in which the sharia laws are implemented. This goal is announced clearly with a campaign slogan: *Islam is the solution*.

They perceive Islam as a way to end the authoritarian control of the government and give an opportunity to the people to govern themselves. For

them, Islam is the only chance to create a reform process which has been desired by people for years. They claim that current system is corrupted and therefore a broad reform process has to start. The sharia laws can create suitable environment for such a reform. Moreover their definition of Islamic state is not an authoritarian one. They argue that such an Islamic state would be a civil state which includes democratic values like free and fair elections [6].

Today Egypt is on the edge of a great transformation after the end of the long standing authoritarian regime. The question is what the direction of this transformation will be. Will Egypt become a free country which is managed by its people or will its fate be determined by actors in the shadow? The Muslim Brotherhood is always the leading actor against oppression but in the long term their path leads to Islamic state which would bring the country into new conflicts with global actors. For that reason their intentions and role in the new regime have to be evaluated carefully. **PR**

Notes:

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- 1) Ziad Munson, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood", *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 487-510
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the Midwest Sociological Society
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121130>
Accessed: 16/04/2009 02:57 p.488
- 2) Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of The Egyptian Muslim Brothers", p.2
- 3) Aini Linjakumpu, *Political Islam in the Global World*, Ithaca Press, UK, 2006, p.64-66
- 4) For the whole list of principles please look <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=813&LevelID=2&SectionID=116>
- 5) Linjakumpu, p.68
- 6) "The Electoral Programme of the Muslim Brotherhood for Shura Council in 2007", <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=822&LevelID=1&SectionID=116>

