

Islamists and the Egyptian revolution

Events mentioned hereafter happened before the end of the revolution. The last article published, from which extracts are shown below, was on February 27th, 2011

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The spotlight is turned on the role of Islamists in the Egyptian revolution, though justified at times it is calculated at most. Some questions are frequently raised by the media, studies centers and western decision makers concerning the role, weight and influence of Islamists in that same revolution, their expected role in the post-revolution era in Egypt, and whether the Egyptian experience will emulate, even partially, the Islamic revolution of Iran.

I have been following the western media coverage of the Egyptian events since day one. I have also had several discussions with western researchers and media personnel and that reinforced my belief that there isn't only a clear lack of awareness (maybe even intentional) of the new facts, but also a lack of knowledge that is being exploited in drawing a far from true traditional image of the Islamists based on fear and intimidation, with what has come to be known as the "Islamist dilemma" for the purpose of hindering any international and humanitarian (as well as democratic) solidarity with this unprecedented revolution in the history of Egypt.

It would be meaningless to talk about the Islamists' status in the new Egypt within the same context and considerations that underlied past studies of the religious reality in Egypt and if we overlooked the fact that what happened was a revolution that brought down the status quo in Egypt's religious picture.

It was not just a revolution against the political regime with its rooted dictatorship, oppression and corruption; a regime based on alliances between money, crime and power mafias as clearly revealed by its strenuous attempts to endure and not be overthrown. It was also a revolution against the religious institutions and discourse supporting the regime sustainability, whether directly through associated movements, institutions and personalities or indirectly through independent actors sharing the regime refusal of the revolution.

It is quite unknown who exactly called for the January 25th demonstrations that coincided with the national police day and was the sparkle that ignited the revolution (that didn't stop until the fall of President Hosni Mubarak's regime on February 11th). What is known for sure is that it wasn't launched by any particular political party or movement. What is more certain is that the Islamic movement was the furthest form starting the revolution or even leading it at later stages and making it its own.

Just as the Egyptian revolution reduced Islamists of different backgrounds to their true dimension as a force of the street, though not the only one and certainly not the leading

one, it reshuffled the whole religious landscape. It clarified the common Egyptian stand as to religion, its institutions and various discourses. The end result was astonishing and totally unpredictable: the Egyptians are religious but still capable of surpassing all the religious authorities and challenge all the religious discourses if they support of a corrupt and oppressive regime.

The official religious institutions were the biggest loser and the most challenged by the revolution. This was not the case of the Muslim religious institution alone but the Christian institution as well. Al Azhar reacted belatedly. It waited too long before its Sheikh Dr. Ahmad Al-Tayyeb made some declarations that weren't explicitly and boldly biased to the regime but still they were not up to the standards of the revolution. Obviously the revolutionists were not waiting for the leaders of the most prominent religious institution in the Islamic world nor cared for its opinion when they took to the street. They were expecting a different speech however Al Azhar hardly changed its discourse as a Sunni institution officially and totally associated with the regime, structurally and financially: it doesn't have the slightest autonomy.

At the height of the revolution, Al Azhar called for calm condemning the killing of Egyptians but overlooking the fact that what happened was a terrible and brutal aggression against the protesters in Tahrir Square perpetrated by the regime and its criminals. Only general issues were mentioned in the scope of ending the protests without even hinting at the regime. Al Azhar's position was redeemed by its sheikh's appraisal of the young revolutionists inviting them to engage in a dialogue; it was also redeemed by the resignation of its official spokesperson, ambassador Mohamed Rifa'ah Al-Tahtawi, who joined the protesters although his resignation was not accepted; and by the participation of many of its preachers and imams with their distinctive clothes in the protests.

Al-Azhar's weak and belated reaction cannot be even compared to that of Dar al-Ifta and its endeavors to provide religious support to the regime; a support climaxing on Friday February the fourth or Departure Friday with the fatwa of Mufti Ali Jomaa to forsake the Friday prayer, the most important occasion after which protesters would rally in the streets.

By the end of the revolution, it became clear that the masses did not turn to the Islamic religious institution; they rather turned a deaf ear to sheikh Jomaa's fatwa. Their response was to show up in mosques for the Friday prayer and march in millions, as they were aware that it was a political fatwa to ensure a religious support to the regime. This was not a first; a similar fatwa considered the deaths of young illegal migrants on death boats as suicide rather than martyrdom; self-immolation as a sign of protest was condemned by fatwas forbidding suicide, considering those who commit suicide by setting themselves on fire as left to an unknown punishment without mentioning those who pushed them to such a fate after depriving them of a decent living.

As for the main Christian institution (the Orthodox Church), it adopted the most blatant example of a regime biased-stand. Pope Shenouda, the Church Patriarch denounced the Day of Anger demonstrations on January 25th and appealed to Copts not to join in. Throughout the revolution, he kept insisting on the need to avoid the demonstrations and related events (at the time when I wrote this article, the Pope had explicitly declared his support to President Mubarak and called for ending the protests) which was rejected by the Coptic majority that took to the street in protest. One important shift in the

Christian reality that goes in line with the revolution is the fact that the strongest criticism of the church, its political allegiance and the monopoly of the Christian political representation by its head (Pope Shenouda) was voiced by the Copts themselves. Dozens of articles and reports criticized the confinement of the Christian voice to the church rather than political parties and representation, attacking its mobilization in support of a rejected and hated regime by the people thus allying Christians against their will to the regime despite the revolution. The Christians' participation, especially the young, was another revolution against the church exclusive hegemony over their political will on the one hand, and on the other against their exclusion from the street in a "confessional" equation rallying them behind Mubarak's regime in return for guarantees and privileges that cannot be granted in reality. It also isolated them from the political and the people movement in general.

Just as the Egyptians surpassed the religious institutions directly associated with and supporting the regime, they also surpassed the Salafists clearly endorsing the regime in their various discourses, as orchestrated by the regime itself or voluntarily at times, and at others given the nature of the Salafi stand that radically rejects a revolution and a political opposition, rather any opposition in general; a fact the regime tried to exploit well enough prior to and during the revolution.

The Salafists unanimously boycotted the demonstrations as they had done with any political opposition in the past. They linked the revolution to disorder and though they suffered 70 years of injustice they still renounced the revolution (knowing that Mubarak's rule lasted 30 and not 70 years!). The revolution was crucial to bring to light this unofficial and maybe unplanned relationship between Mubarak and Salafism: a Salafism fostered and protected by the regime, the Salafism of the Guardians of the faithful affairs that is an extension of the Jami or Madkhali Salafism; and a Salafism which followers are killed and tortured every once in a while without any hesitation and for various pretexts; a situation that did not constitute a political contradiction for the president as long as that Salafism supported him politically.

One paradox of the Egyptian situation is that the same regime that had a short while ago shut down the Salafists' TV network as it held them accountable for the confessional violence and crisis that followed - although it had fostered them for a while and allowed them to broadcast through its satellite, NileSat - reused their religious symbols and sheikhs in its war against the demonstrators, but this time on its official and affiliated private networks. Many were featured as guests such as Mohamed Hassan, Mahmoud Al-Masry and Mostafa al-Adwy and others to appeal to the protesters and issue fatwas to end the demonstrations and clear the streets. Lengthy well-known speeches were made about the blessings of security and safety and the dangers of unrest and turmoil. Some even went as far as explicitly contesting and challenging the patriotism of the revolution instigators and its origins, classifying it as a Zionist and American conspiracy at times and at others Iranian - despite the conflict between the two plotting sides! The Iranian leadership opportunistic interference in the revolution claiming that it was an Islamic revolution rather an extension of the Iranian Islamic revolution was but another reason for the Salafi war against the revolution.

What is also worth noting is the linkage between the Egyptian Wahhabi Salafi discourse and its roots extending back to Saudi Arabia. The same expressions prohibiting the revolution and discrediting the revolutionists were used in the Egyptian Salafi discourse,

evident in the statement of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiya which is the first Wahhabi Salafi Association in Egypt (1926), were heavily and explicitly used in the Saudi Wahhabi Salafi discourse of the Kingdom's Mufti at the climax of the Egyptian revolution, stating that all protests and revolutions in the Arab world are without a doubt western conspiracies against the Islamic nation!

The stand of the Madkhali and Jami Salafi movement was understandable and expected especially given previous instances that clearly confirmed its association with the regime, the last of which being the infamous Salafi fatwa to kill the prominent opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei for being a Khawarij! That fatwa was issued by the same person who, during the presidential elections of 2005, prohibited in yet another fatwa, running against President Mubarak, for he is the Guardian of the Faithful. But what was unexpected was the position of the political wing of the Salafi movement i.e. the Salafi Da'wa School in Alexandria. It has long been seen as more independent from the regime if not its opposition. It had often been subject to oppression and arrest campaigns, the worst of which after the bloody attack on the Saints Church on New Year's Eve. Hundreds of Salafists were arrested and one of them (Sayed Bilal) died under torture. Despite all that, the Salafi Da'wa School followers in Alexandria and in more than ten governorates refused the revolution and insisted on non-participation. They then launched an intimidation campaign warning against the revolution negative repercussions, voicing fears of disorder and hurly-burly, as the popular expression goes. They even went to the extent of closing some mosques on Departure Day (including the famous Abu Hanifa Mosque in the Boukhalil neighborhood for example). They also expressed concerns over the Islamic identity threatened by the rise of opposed movements maybe in a reference to Mohamed ElBaradei and the National Association for Change.

The Salafi movement rejected the demonstrations several days before their start. The Salafi Da'wa School confirmed in many statements its rejection and even published on its website (salafvoice) and in a fatwa of its most prominent leader Yasser Borhami the prohibition of the demonstrations and warned against them. Sheikh Sherif Al-Hawari even mocked the protests and refused to take part in them. He mocked revolutions that start big (he meant the suicide incidents that preceded it). He even said explicitly that the demonstrations will be exploited to deal a blow to Egypt, implying foreign interference. Even after the demonstrations turned into a full-fledged popular revolution the Salafi movement in Alexandria, and throughout Egypt, still refused to join in. The Salafi discourse and practices improved greatly. They became more moderate and positive in many instances: they called for the protection of public and private properties, mainly of Christians and foreigners and forbid any attempt against them; and appealed Egyptians to stand up to thugs and thieves and to participate in public committees that transformed mosques into their headquarters. They also issued a fatwa prohibiting exploitation and raising prices during the revolution and asked for active action to be taken against any such exploitation by creating groups that would buy vegetables and food from the source to resell them in cheap prices to citizens. Despite all these developments in the Salafists' position, they still fell short of assuming the political role or effectively participating in the revolution (in its protesting nature) by taking to the street. They went ahead of things and opened a debate on issues that were not remotely linked to the demonstrators' problems and objectives. They were rather

concerned with the identity of the Egyptian state and the amendment of article two of the constitution which stipulates that Islam is the state religion and that the Sharia is the main source of the legislation, although that issue was not even on the revolutionists' agenda.

The Salafi direct or indirect support of the regime was very evident. Salafism became the strongest religious pillar of the regime in its final hours. We can therefore say that the future of Salafism will be at stake. It would have had the opportunity to strengthen its stand had the revolution been broken and the regime upheld: that would have justified the Salafism stand as anti-revolution and anti-political opposition and would have rendered it the entity most tolerated and supported by the regime in the face of its opponents and of the demonstrators' demand of a regime guarantying freedom, democracy and social justice. What is evident – at least at the time when these words were written – is that the revolutionary movement in the street during the past days had surpassed the Salafist entity and its components. It will surely be subject to criticism and review in the future.

Evidently, this overview of the Salafi movement is based on a wide and intentional generalization. The general position of the Salafi movement, at odds with the revolution and in bed with the regime, does not exclude some loud Salafi voices from within the revolution. Prominent and radical voices criticized the regime more fiercely than liberal and leftist movements, for example, the Reform Party project that was adopted by Salafi politicians mainly Gamal Sultan during the late 1990s. In addition, many Salafists joined the demonstrators and protesters at Tahrir Square, not as cadre but as general members of the Salafi movement or as young people revolting against their elders who adopted for an anti-revolution position.

The political powers of the Islamic movement remained divided between armed Jihadi powers that had fought the system before re-examining itself and renouncing violence and the pacifist powers namely the Muslim Brotherhood.

There is no comprehensive information about the Jihadi movement that had renounced violence and turned to peaceful means, nor had it issued specific statements clarifying its position on the revolution with the exception of a statement by two Jihadi leaders, Abboud and Tariq Al-Zamr, in favor of the protests. The Islamic Group (Jamaa Islamiya) and the rest of the Jihadi movement that renounced violence were more prone to appeasement and ending the demonstrations which is understandable and expected since thousands of Muslims can still feel the security forces grip and their violent methods and still recall the long years of imprisonment they had endured in the worst conditions, witnessing hundreds of their brothers getting killed outside the law.

The Islamic Group most salient stand lied in its refusal to bring down President Mubarak as they were satisfied with him just not running for office again. "Be merciful with your cherished ..." was the title of one of the main articles published by its most prominent leader who forgot the rest of the popular saying "...your cherished one is humiliation"; and in inviting the Group to enter the national dialogue though they had been completely excluded from any political discussions and had never been party to any such endeavors. The surprising part was the regime instant reply inviting the Group to indeed join the dialogue, which in my belief was part of a scheme to include as many actors so as to generalize the discussion on various issues not directly related to the revolutionists' demands, proposing a multitude of probably inconsistent agendas that

would prolong the dialogue without ever reaching any outcome.

As for the Muslim Brotherhood, given their political nature, they did not follow in the Salafists' footsteps of boycotting the demonstrations and related events. However, they were not at the front row of the revolution: neither at its inception nor in leading the street. The Brotherhood hesitated for several days before taking a stance on the demonstration of Tuesday January 25 which ignited the revolution. And when they finally made up their mind in favor of the revolution, their participation was limited to individuals as regular people and was not by a central decision fostering the revolution and imposing the participation of all members. Their participation was anticipated with concern and vigilance. The Brotherhood stressed on the importance of not getting carried away by young revolutionist speeches and directly insult President Mubarak. Even after the first demonstration was a success, the Brotherhood did not fully embrace the revolution. Up until the Anger Friday demonstration (on January 28th), the young revolutionists movement that was not fostered by any political party or organization was way ahead of the Brotherhood, though both were not that different: both had long ago gave up on politics and public action and despaired of their feasibility; and both had lost faith in all political organizations and parties.

The Brotherhood position changed immensely after the success of Anger Friday demonstrations. It was the rebirth of the Egyptian people; known for their patience and endurance they had transformed into angry revolutionists. It is from that anger and rebellion that the Brotherhood gained the courage to take the initiative and start a gradual but important shift of position. As of Friday night, their participation grew gradually into a crucial and radical participation, as it reached the point of no return. They played a prominent role at the turning point of the revolution especially on Wednesday February the second as they stood firm in the face of the brutal attacks of Mubarak's forces that left many dead in Tahrir Square. In my opinion, there were many underlying reasons for that shift; on the one hand, the regime with its oppressive security apparatus that had long targeted the Brothers was crumbling down; its violence and atrocities still linger in their minds; and on the other, the massive scope of the popular coverage will shield any single movement from reprisals, as was the case with the Brotherhood so many times before. There was also the pragmatic dimension: the Brotherhood could not have passed on such a crucial occasion that ushered a new dawn where they would search for their place and for legitimacy. But the most important reason in my opinion is that there was no turning back. They were aware more than all others that if the revolution fails they'll be the first to bear the brunt.

The pragmatic dimension was not completely absent from the Brotherhood agenda in the later phases of the revolution. Although they took to the streets and never fell back, a striking change in their position happened on the night of Saturday February the 5th, when they accepted to take part in the national dialogue prior to Mubarak's departure. They said they were engaging in a dialogue with the regime and that discussions will include the president's departure. Maybe that was a nice cover for their decision to engage in the discussions, but what is certain is that they would have relinquished that demand had the regime survived and would have let it dictate the rules of the game. There is a traditional suspicion that the Brotherhood in their political thinking always stay closer to the ruling powers and that they would be always willing or at least accepting to be associated with the regime even when they are rising against it or more

precisely participating in the uprising against the old oppressive, totalitarian and bloody regime. Many pressures govern the Brotherhood decision in dealing with the regime mainly the overarching desire to circumvent the legal prohibition that had become government leitmotiv. There was also the desire, maybe hastened, to translate the revolution achievements into a quantum leap in their legal and political status and their public role locally and internationally, when they were invited to the national dialogue table with the former vice-president on equal footing with the official parties. Maybe the major drive for the Brotherhood was the mentality or spirit that dictated their relation with the revolution.

The Brotherhood first joined the demonstrations with a pre-revolution mentality. It is with that same mentality that they kept amending their political agenda and decisions as the revolution unfolded. They were acting in the same mentality and spirit that had prevailing before January 25th even before they left the revolution ranks.

I witnessed something in Alexandria that could clarify what I am saying. There were more than a million and a half protesters in the streets of Alexandria, invading all spaces and places. They were active, rebelling, yelling and screaming, making demands and interacting together and the Brothers like the rest of the people were part of the revolution. Their preacher had stood up amidst the crowds and filled the air with his fierce words and speeches. And then, as he grew tired, he said the traditional prayer: "Glory be to Allah and Praise, There is No God But Allah, We ask Him for forgiveness and to Him we repent", recited the afternoon surah ... and called on people to dismiss quietly!

The Brotherhood leader, even amidst his unity with the revolutionists, was still thinking in the same traditional mentality of the Brotherhood that apparently had not been changed by the revolution. He had not mind standing and preaching for hours in front of crowds he had not gathered nor he had ever dreamt of gathering, still when he felt tired, when he felt the demonstration gaining momentum while he had no more energy to go on, he did not mind dismissing them without even bothering to ask whether people still had the energy and power to carry on, and whether the masses should leave simply because he ran out of energy and words. Did he need to have a guidebook for the revolution explaining its dynamics and demands?

Maybe these were really some of the premises of the crisis faced by those dealing with the events in a pre-revolution mindset. In their minds, there was a threshold that the revolution couldn't go beyond. Even before the revolution itself ever dreamt of it, the movement wasn't going to wither before the fall of the entire regime, a path set in motion by the accelerating pace of the revolution itself.

The Egyptian revolution, with all the events and demonstrations that swept the streets, bears witness to the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood, calculated at times and impulsive at others. Nonetheless, in general, they were in line with the Egyptian demonstrators and were only distinguished by the historical marks of their religious eloquence and appearance and by some distinctive expressions and behavioral traits. It is worth noting how the demonstrators avoided the pitfalls of divisions and categorizations contrary to the Islamic Movement. In the flow of events, they transcended such pitfalls without any sensitivity, reacting only to what could threaten the unity of the street. I remember some instances from Anger Friday, when I crossed 16 km on foot, that give a clear understanding of the Islamists' position as to the emerging

reality of Egypt revolution; the first was when the demonstrators got organized in the street for the sunset prayer, some Islamists tried to impose their logic through doctrinal opinions forbidding praying with their shoes on or with women and girls amidst them. They got a firm but calm answer to stick to their own business. Also, at prayer time, some Christians and Muslims didn't join in the prayers; they stopped to rest, smoke, organize traffic and bring food and water to people. Slogans improvised on the spur of the moment and in the heat of the events were not only patriotic slogans uniting all Egyptians and calling for freedom, democracy and social justice; they rose above old taboos that the Islamists have endeavored to avoid and even insisted on prohibiting. Slogans such as "Long Live the Crescent and the Cross" and "Muslims and Christians All for Egypt" were raised. The most significant instance is the fact that Alexandria had not witnessed any confessional tension since the start of the revolution. The Saints Church which was the last victim of denominationalism was protected by young Muslims after the security forces fled relinquishing their duties. And there was no need to protect it anymore. Thousands of churches all over Egypt and not just Alexandria did not require any further protection after being almost transformed into barracks for the security forces.

Of course things might be confusing for an outsider. Images of beards and veils could be seen as reflecting a political representation of the Islamists, along with images of protesters praying in the streets and squares repeating religious mottos. However, a closer look would confirm the inaccurate picture and misunderstanding of the connection between the demonstrators and Islamists. And maybe that was intentionally done for political exploitation, particularly to influence the international position as to the revolution in Egypt.

Religious appearances are part of the Egyptian identity of Muslims and Christians alike. They cannot be linked to any ideological or political interpretation. The religious manifestations and expressions, no matter how intense, cannot be simply exploited by one particular religious and political movement. We should recall that the Egyptian people is the most religious in the world based on the famous survey of the American Globe Institute; a thief in Egypt would pray and ask for God's forgiveness before stealing, while an Egyptian communist practices the Friday prayers, his wife wears the hijab and his most precious wish is to visit the Prophet's tomb before dying. The hijab in Egypt is worn by all social classes including the political, military and entertainment elite; we have known the phenomenon of religiously committed actresses. The veil is a religious, cultural and social phenomenon and doesn't necessarily reflect an ideological or political orientation. The same applies to the beard. These appearances were heavily present in the protests, though boycotted by the Salafists. It is a clear indication that these appearances do not reflect a political or ideological background contrary to what some western and Arab media fearing the revolution tried to convey to the masses in an overblown and sometimes direct comparison between the Egyptian revolution and the Iranian Islamic revolution.

I believe that one of the outcomes of the great revolution is that it had revealed the real dimension of the Islamic Movement and its precise weight in the street: it is a true force to be reckoned with but it is not the only one. It might be influential and efficient but that is conditioned by how it responds to the true feelings and demands of the people who is fed up with ideological jargons and the game of power over who controls the

street with mere slogans or fabricated causes. The beauty of the matter is that the categorization did not happen – at least until the time these words were written. Everyone is delaying the categorization process till after the revolution objectives are fulfilled. It will no doubt happen. But then the scenery will be completely different. I am completely certain that the future will be radically different whereby it cannot be understood based on any of the analytical tools that we have been using to assess the status of the Islamists. It is a revolution.

The Egyptian revolution is not the Iranian Islamist revolution although the religious aspect was always a part of it. We can also say that it is not a revival of the July revolution of sixty years ago for it does not raise nationalistic demands that are unique to Egypt. It falls under the universal human demands of freedom, democracy and social justice.

Notes
