

Islam: A Friend or Foe of Democracy in the New Egypt?

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Will Islam impel or impede democracy in Egypt? There is probably no question whose answer is less clear and more hotly debated than this one in the context of Egypt's current transition. It is worth remembering that, especially in the Islamic world, democratic institutions that involve elections do not always involve religious freedom as well. Witness Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Indonesia. So we may ask further: Even if Islam supports democracy in Egypt, will it also support full religious freedom for Coptic Christians, who are 10% of the population, as well as Islamic dissenters? President Obama's stress on religious freedom in his recent speech on peace in the Middle East even more squarely places this value in the middle of the conversation.

There are causes for worry. Only last month Islamists in southern Egypt have practiced civil obedience against their regional government on account of its governor being a Coptic Christian. Islamist attacks on Coptic Christians have continued apace after Mubarak's overthrow in February. But the greatest worries center around the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic organization in Egypt and one of the most influential Islamic organizations in all of the Middle East. Standard charges against the Muslim Brotherhood include its incorporation of Hamas into its network, its calls for the destruction of the Israeli state, and its advocacy of a *sharia* state that might subordinate women and make religious minorities second class citizens. The Brotherhood contains evidence for all of these charges, it cannot be denied. Even today, the organization's political platform opposes women and Christians being allowed to become president.

Youssef Qaradawi, an Egyptian higher-up in the Brotherhood, advocates the stoning of homosexuals and the murder of Israeli children because they might grow up to be Israeli soldiers.

A frequent contemporary worry of westerners is that too rapid a transition will favor the Brotherhood, which is far larger, older, and better organized than the other movements that led the recent democratic revolution. The Brotherhood is popular among Egyptians, too, garnering a 75% “positive” mark in a recent poll that the Pew Global Attitudes Project conducted. In a recent meeting with young democratic activists in Egypt, then, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton felt her “heart sink” when she realized how poorly organized secular democratic activist groups are in comparison with the Brotherhood and other Islamists.

It was exactly such fears that Mubarak brandished in the face of the U.S. over the course of his reign of three decades, warning that should the U.S. retreat from its alliance with him or even make the alliance more conditional on progress towards democracy, rule by the Muslim Brotherhood would be the result. As Egypt’s recent foreign minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit recently told Hillary Clinton, according to Ryan Lizza writing in *The New Yorker*, “[M]y daughter gets to go out at night. And, God damn it, I’m not going to turn this country over to people who will run back the clock on her rights.” The U.S. bought the argument. The administration of George W. Bush, for instance, rhetorically urged Egypt to make progress towards democracy. “Our goal here is to encourage the Egyptian Government, within its own laws and hopefully within a process and a context that is ever more reforming, to engage with civil society, with the people of Egypt for elections that can be free and fair,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

remarked in a speech at America University in Cairo in June 2005. But the administration stopped short of demanding that the Egyptian government remove its ban on the electoral participation of Egypt's largest opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, which it associated with terrorism. In the same 2005 address, Rice continued, "[b]ut we have not engaged the Muslim Brotherhood and we don't – we won't."

The same attitude helps to explain the vacillation and reluctance that characterized the Obama administration's slowness to support the democratic revolution. Only days before Mubarak's downfall, according to Lizza, a White House official summarized Mubarak's message to the U.S. during the uprising as "Muslim Brotherhood, Muslim Brotherhood, Muslim Brotherhood."

In my view, however, it would be a grave mistake for the U.S. to orient its policy around a one-dimensional fear of the Muslim Brotherhood or to seek to push the Brotherhood towards the margins of Egyptian politics. The Brotherhood is far from a simple organization, consisting of multiple factions and transnational variegation. At least in Egypt, the organization is by and large non-violent, committed to democratic engagement, characterized by a younger generation that is more liberal than its elders, and distinct from several other Islamic organizations in Egypt that have indeed chosen the path of terrorism and violent opposition. It has reiterated this stance since Mubarak's downfall. This stance indeed stems from the very political theology of the Brotherhood, which calls for a revival that begins with personal piety, is to be followed by the spread of Islam through persuasion and civil society structures, and is expected to usher in a *sharia* state only after Islam has been widely planted in the minds and hearts

of the population. In the recent democratic revolution, the Brotherhood was an important part of the coalition of protest – not the central actor but rather what Monica Duffy Toft, Timothy Samuel Shah, and I call a “supporting actor” in our recent book, *God’s Century*.

Nor is the Brotherhood a static organization. How it behaves will depend in good part on the kind of institutional environment that emerges, and, to some extent, on the attitude of the United States towards the Brotherhood. In previous writings, I, and then together with Toft and Shah, have argued that religious groups are much more likely to act peacefully and favorably towards democracy in a setting where they are allowed freedom to practice, worship, and advocate their cultural and political program – that is, when religious freedom obtains, including for organizations. We also made the case that when they are repressed they are much more likely to become violent and themselves repressive of others. An open environment not only gives them freedom to advocate and operate but it also tends to moderate them by encouraging them to persuade, to allow themselves to be criticized, and to build coalitions with other groups. Institutional environment is not everything. A religious group’s “political theology” – its religiously inspired beliefs about politics – will matter independently. But even political theology is likely to become more moderate in a free setting.

If our argument is correct, then the future behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood is in good part conditional. Engaging the Brotherhood in democratic politics is not risk free. It is always possible that the organization will take up the reins of power and rule according to the repressive side of its

political theology. But perhaps the best question to ask is: What sort of policy is most likely to encourage a democratic Brotherhood that respects minorities? We believe that harsh secular authoritarianism is most likely to be the best incubator for Islamism. It is also worth remembering that Mubarak's regime, with its 20,000 political prisoners, was hardly a model of freedom either, either political freedom, or religious freedom, whether for traditional Muslims or even for Copts. Again, the question is what is Egypt moving towards and how do we get there, not whether Mubarak's secularism or organized Islam matches up to the standards of a model democracy. For this reason, the U.S. must learn to engage religious actors – not to write them a blank check, as it did for Mubarak, but to encourage their best tendencies towards human rights, democracy, and religious freedom and to hold them accountable when they veer from these values. In this way, the U.S. would take more seriously Obama's recent stress on religious freedom. In a recent piece in the *New York Review of Books*, writer Ian Johnson recounts how the U.S. has long sought secret ties with the Muslim Brotherhood as part of a strategy first to fight communism and then to fight Al Qaeda. Let us now make these ties more open, extending a publicly outstretched hand to the best potential for democracy and religious freedom among Egyptian Muslims. In March, one Muslim Brotherhood leader told Lizza that "Hillary was against the revolution from the beginning to the last day, O.K.?" He then went on to say "Obama supported this revolution. She was against." A more far-sighted U.S. policy would leave little doubt among religious democrats that the U.S. is on their side.