



Volume 6, Number 2

January 26, 2012

## **Egypt: The "Stolen" Revolution?**

**Mira Tzoreff**

The decisive victory of the Muslim Brotherhood's *Huriyya wal-'Adala* (Freedom and Justice) Party (38 percent of the votes), and unexpected success of the Salafist's *al-Nour* (Light) Party (29 percent) in the elections for the Egyptian People's Assembly, clearly indicate the Egyptian public's preference for the Islamization of Egyptian political life. However, this doesn't mean that most Egyptians support the idea of their country becoming an Islamic theocracy, or that they believe that Islam, by itself, is the solution to their social and economic plight.

For the Egyptian people it was undoubtedly a formative historical moment: elections were both transparent and supervised by independent Egyptian judges, empowering Egyptian voters as never before. The high voter turnout (62 percent in the first round and 67 percent in the second) indicated their belief that the elections symbolized the victory of the Egyptian revolution, particularly against the background of the patently unfair elections held by the Mubarak regime one year earlier. The general euphoria was reflected in a popular joke in which an Egyptian complains that the current elections were unfair and illegitimate, as for the first time in many years his long-dead grandfather was deprived of the right to vote. "Where are the good old days of Husni Mubarak," he bemoaned, a man who "demonstrated respect for the dead?"

At the forefront of these elections was the issue of Egypt's collective identity. The voters were asked to vote for parties whose platforms espoused either a secular-liberal identity and agenda, or a conservative religious-Islamic one. The results constituted a strong statement of the Egyptian public's desire to place Islam more in the center of its political life and collective identity than it had been previously. Perceiving secularism as an inseparable element of the discredited, recently overthrown autocratic regime, most Egyptians prefer a

soft Islamic approach to politics. In addition, the majority of Egyptians see no contradiction between their national and their Islamic identities but view them, rather, as "complementary opposites" that can exist together in the marketplace of political ideas.

The prevalent assumption that the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood's party are mainly from the lower social strata that live either in poor urban neighborhoods or in the rural villages of the Delta is inaccurate. Among the party's supporters one can find members of the Egyptian elites, who have come to terms with the on-going process of Islamization taking place in their country, as well as young, highly educated but unemployed middle-class Egyptians, who benefited from the Brotherhood's social projects when it was a persecuted opposition movement. For example, Muslim Brotherhood members often paid young graduates' membership fees in professional associations in order to help them find jobs that suited their education and abilities. Likewise, since many young people were not able to marry because of the high costs of the "marriage bargain", the Brotherhood assisted by arranging and financing marriage ceremonies and by finding affordable housing for the newlyweds. Although these initiatives did not solve Egypt's "marriage crisis", they did succeed in saving a considerable number of young men from being forever trapped in bachelorhood and many young women from acquiring the unflattering title of "old spinster".

Nonetheless, not only observers in the West are concerned about the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power; the victory of the Islamist current has become a major concern of both Egyptian liberals and the young "Tahrir Square" revolutionaries, which is often expressed through sarcastic humor. One particularly illustrative joke speaks of Egyptian society being divided into two main groups: "*Takfir wal-Hijra*", an extremist *al-Qa'ida* inspired Egyptian Islamic movement which engaged in a violent struggle with the authorities in the 1970s and early 1990s, as well as in terror activities both in Egypt and in Europe in 2004 and 2011; and "*Tafkir fi al-Hijra*", an imaginary group that tries to come up with creative, out-of-the-box ideas on how to emigrate as soon as possible from Egypt. This *Takfir/Tafkir* play on words reflects the deep concern among Egypt's liberals and Christian Coptic minority.

The Muslim Brotherhood leadership is fully aware of these concerns both within the country and outside. It is also cognizant of the profound criticism of younger members of the movement who, feeling that the veteran leadership has become too conservative, decided to leave the movement and establish a political party of their own: "*al-Tayar al-Masri*", (The Egyptian Current). Although the Brotherhood has now gained the political legalization and legitimization for which it had long yearned, party members did not rest on their laurels and maintained an ongoing dialogue with their constituencies. This stood in sharp contrast to the passivity of liberal and youth parties. For example, while the latter attempted to persuade the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to postpone the elections, the Freedom and Justice party held its first public conference on a Cairo street, attended by hundreds of local residents. Muhammad al-Baltagi, one of the party's secretary generals, reminded the audience of Mubarak's forty-year rule, which was "a terrible nightmare," and the regime's corrupt parliament that was based on "100

percent rigged elections." Other members highlighted the party's three main objectives: "unemployment benefits to help those who cannot find jobs; medical insurance for everyone; and a higher quality of education." There is no doubt that the underlying purpose of the conference was to highlight the party's visibility in the public sphere, this while activists of the other political parties remained "virtual" candidates, actually *personae inconnu*, which undoubtedly contributed to the resounding defeat of "Tahrir Square" youth and liberal candidates in the elections. So did their continued addiction to the "we did it" euphoria of the revolution's heyday, at the expense of the Sisyphean work of establishing political parties, formulating platforms, and choosing a representative leadership.

Seeking to calm the fears of liberal Muslim and Christian Egyptians following its electoral triumph, the Freedom and Justice Party aligned itself with a newly formed democratic bloc that was composed of eight liberally inclined, mostly veteran parties. Together, they emphasized their adherence to universal enlightened values such as democracy, human rights, and modernity. The Muslim Brotherhood also made great efforts to emphasize the substantive difference between their party and the Salafist's *al-Nour* Party. One prominent Brotherhood leader Mahmoud Ghazlen stated that one shouldn't view the Islamic current as a monolith. Indeed, unlike the *al-Nour* Party, which advocates the establishment of an Islamic theocracy, the Freedom and Justice Party is situated among the pragmatic *al-Wasatiyya* streams of Islam. Furthermore, the Salafis and the Brotherhood tend to draw their supporters from different social categories: *al-Nour* supporters tend to be residents of poor urban neighborhoods and rural areas, as well as blue-collar workers. In a country like Egypt, where 40 percent of the population is defined as "poor" and 6 out of 10 households earn less than \$277 a month, there can be little wonder that *al-Nour*, which provides social and religious services free of charge, is quite popular. In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood, as mentioned above, has a significant base of support among the middle and upper classes as well. To be sure, however, both parties are intimately involved at the grass-roots level. For example, to combat an out-of-control garbage crisis in the coastal city of Alexandria, Salafist doctors have been knocking on doors to raise awareness among people about the negative health consequences of piling up one's garbage on the city's pavements and streets, while Muslim Brotherhood volunteers have set up neighborhood food markets where, in order to combat price hikes of basic foodstuffs, they sell vegetables, fruits and meat at below market prices.

On the ideological-programmatic level, the Muslim Brotherhood displayed an ability to adapt themselves to the new circumstances by redrafting its 2007 platform to put it more in line with the spirit of the times and make it more palatable to the general public. For example, it canceled the clause advocating the establishment of a council of senior religious persona whose rulings both the president and the prime minister were obliged to accept. The main task of this council, the new platform declared, will be limited to clarifying the rulings of the *Shari`a* to various governmental institutions. The revised platform also highlights the movement's support for democracy, conflating "popular will" with the Islamic value of acting for the general interest (*maslahah*). At the same time, it identifies democracy with *shura*, the Islamic principle of

consultation. By Islamizing democracy, Brotherhood theoreticians try to prove that the democratic idea is not a Western import but an authentically Islamic one, in accordance with its principles, and as such is not an example of *bid`a* (heretical innovation). As active participants in the lively debates regarding the status of women and minority rights, they consciously omitted the platform's previous clause that stated that neither a woman nor a Copt could serve as a president or as a prime minister. The Brotherhood's caution is also being expressed in another important sphere: relations with the military. On the one hand, it takes pains not to avoid appearances of collaborating with the "anti- revolutionary" SCAF; on the other hand, it refrains from joining the young Tahrir Square liberals in their demand for the immediate ousting of Tantawi and his coterie of colonels.

The resounding electoral success of the Freedom and Justice Party signifies the arrival on the Egyptian political scene of a hybrid model, one that combines an Egyptian national identity along with an Islamic one, and modernity along with Islamic religious tenets. Indeed, rather than divorcing themselves from the West, the leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party are deeply engaged in introductory meetings with newly responsive American and European officials who had previously kept the Brotherhood at arms' length.

One may well argue that the Brotherhood's increased hybridity is primarily a verbal sleight of hand. However, it is reasonable to assume that both the burden of governance and the fear of a possible failure, as well as the necessity of fulfilling their promises to an expectant public that can no longer be ignored, may force the party to adopt pragmatic policies that will result in it forming a coalition with the liberal parties, in order to at least begin addressing Egypt's deep-seated problems.

*Mira Tzoreff is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.*

**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

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