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PEACEFUL ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS AND THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

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BY: DR. AMR EL SHOBAKI

Arab Forum for Alternatives
A.F.A. (www.afaegypt.org)
3 Elsheikh Elamaraghi str. App.93
Agouza- Giza- Egypt
Telefax: +2- 33359852:
Info@afaegypt.org



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By: Dr. Amr El Shobaki

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- **About the author:**

President of the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA), and Director of Arab- European Unit in EL Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS): Well known Researcher who had participated in many International Conferences and wrote many books especially about Islamic Movements, and Arab European relations. He is also a public intellectual as he's writing every week in "El Masry Al Youm" Egyptian Newspaper.

- **Paper abstract:**

For years, the question of political Islam has loomed over any attempt to reform politics in the Arab world. Opponents of reform say that democratisation would allow Islamists to grab power and then turn their back to democracy. This line of reasoning is being used as a weapon by those who want to undermine the process of political and democratic reform in the Arab world. Advocates of this line of reasoning also claim to be opposed to foreign intervention in our internal affairs. Therefore, this paper tries to examine the following questions: Is it true that the Islamic current is so structurally flawed that it cannot tolerate democracy? Are the problems impeding the integration of the Islamic current in democratisation "genetic" ones embedded in the structure of its discourse and the nature of the doctrinal text from which it emerges? Or is the problem related to the nature of the political context that surrounds the Islamist phenomenon?

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Peaceful Islamist Currents and the Challenges of Integration in the Political Process:

We need to differentiate between two types of religious groups. We have religious groups that embrace violence, such as al-Jihad and al-Gamaah al-Islamia (Islamic Group) of Egypt, which were the role model for Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Armed Group of Algeria, and the Jihadist Salafi groups in the Arab Maghreb. Then we have another type of groups which believes in peaceful propagation of its views. The peaceful groups include conservative ones (some would say reactionary) such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, as well as liberal ones, such as the Justice and Development Party in Turkey and its namesake in Morocco.

The parties that qualify for integration, regardless of their political leanings, are the peaceful groups. One such group is the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna. The MB remains a most influential political and religious group in the Arab world and it has 88 deputies in the Egyptian parliament.

For years, the question of political Islam has loomed over any attempt to reform politics in the Arab world. Opponents of reform say that democratisation would allow Islamists to grab power and then turn their back to democracy. This line of reasoning is being used as a weapon by those who want to undermine the process of political and democratic reform in the Arab world. Advocates of this line of reasoning also claim to be opposed to foreign intervention in our internal affairs. They claim to be defending our cultural and political legacy. And, of course, they keep stop warning us from the Islamist threat.

Is it true that the Islamic current is so structurally flawed that it cannot tolerate democracy? This is the question one must address at some point. In other words, are the problems impeding the integration of the Islamic current in democratisation "genetic" ones embedded in the structure of its discourse and the nature of the doctrinal text from which it emerges? Or is the problem related to the nature of the political context that surrounds the Islamist phenomenon? In brief, can democracy reshape the Islamic discourse and make it compatible with the rules of modern politics?

The history of political movements and ideas has never been guided by doctrine alone. Often, it is practical matters that matter most. Look at the way communism developed in western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s and you'll see how different it is from the way it developed in totalitarian Eastern Europe within the same period. The same can be true to the Islamists. Those who live in a democracy tend to act and think in a certain way. This is why we must not disassociate the discourse of Islamist currents in the Arab world from the existing political regimes and social realities.

Political Currents and the Process of Reform

The cause of democratic reform captures the imagination of all opposition political forces in Egypt, including the MB. Even the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) couldn't help admitting the need for reform. Professional associations and student unions are also ardent proponents of democracy.

The MB, having embraced the calls for reform, organised a series of demonstrations that called for political reform, urged the abrogation of the emergency laws, and demanded the release of political detainees. A few MB members, acting on their own initiative, joined the opposition umbrella movement Kefaya. For the first time in Egypt's modern history, the slogan "Reform is the Solution" was accepted by both the left and the right, as well as endorsed by Kefaya. The drive for reform was so strong that the argument that we should confront "US imperialism" and Zionism before fixing our politics was finally abandoned. Among the various political elites in the country, many called for the creation of a viable political system.

Political currents and reform: The case of the MB

The history of the MB is intertwined with the history of Egyptian political regimes. The MB came to being in the semi-liberal, monarchical era. It clashed with the Nasserist regime, reconciled somewhat with al-Sadat's regime, and survived unmolested during the first two decades of Mubarak's rule. Relations between the government and the MB deteriorated during the 2004 "spring of reform", when the government detained 1,000 MB members in the worst crackdown since Mubarak took power in 1981.

While officially banned, the MB remains a major influence in the country's political and intellectual scene. Before and after 1952, the MB had considerable input into the recurring debate about national identity, cultural legacy, and the interaction between politics and religions. The MB managed to survive on a diet of ambiguities and contradictions. To this day, some people join the MB because it is mainly a political group while others join it because it is a mainly religious group.

The MB has considerable political experience. Its politically active members contested the 1984 elections in alliance with the Wafd Party, led an Islamic alliance in the 1987, and ran as independent candidates in 1995 and 2000. MB members also contested elections in professional associations and gained control of more than one syndicate. But the politically active MB members coexist with an old guard who, for all their religious training, don't know much about elections. Members of the old guard believe that political problems will be resolved once everyone is a good Muslim. This idea is still strong inside the MB, and some of the younger members used to embrace it before they became attracted to the allure of political reform. Once

the debate over reform began in the country, various opposition parties, as well as the umbrella movement Kefaya, started forcefully arguing for the cause of democracy.

I am not saying that it is easy to integrate the peaceful currents of political Islam in political and democratic reform. But I cannot see a chance for real democratic reform otherwise. Without democratic reform, no secular-minded elite would emerge to challenge the Islamists in unionist or legislative elections. Rigging the elections may be one way of keeping Islamists down, but it undermines the entire political system.

Contrary to the common assumption, the Islamist current has a modern organisational and political structure. And the public is willing to judge this current on the basis of its political programme and intellectual leanings, rather than any tribal or financial considerations. The Islamist current has acted with self-discipline in more than one professional association, engaging fully in democratic practices and accepting the rules of free elections. It has also shown considerable awareness regarding democracy, human rights and the freedom of arts and speech, at least more so than some of the regime-sponsored clerics.

The renovation of peaceful political Islam would encourage the largest political forces in Egypt and the Arab world to embrace democracy. But for this renovation to happen, domestic and foreign encouragement is needed. Once democracy picks up pace, the social and political context may shift, giving way for a more liberal interpretation of holy texts and a more active integration of Islamists in the political scene.

The Conflict between the Islamists and the Regime

The Islamists are not, as some claim, soldiers of darkness bent on bringing down the modern state. Much of their conflict is due to the fact that most Arab governments don't cherish the prospect of facing the Islamists in fair and free elections.

Utterances of religious ignorance are common in the Arab worlds, along with assaults on creativity and freethinking. But most of these emanate not from the Islamists, but from the government-sponsored media and mosques. The Arab governments tolerate the most backward clerics so long as they steer away from politics. I find the backwardness of official clerical as intellectually demeaning as the most inane soap operas one watches on Arab televisions.

To reiterate, the battle between peaceful political Islam and Arab regimes is not one between darkness and progress. More often, it is a battle between politicians and bureaucrats, dynamism and stagnation. Therefore, we need to overhaul the structure of the state and government. Only then, it would be possible for the secularists to take on the Islamists in legislative elections without need for rigging or other extra-legal measures.

One way of integrating political Islam movements in the process of democratisation in Egypt is to allow the Wasat Party to operate. Wasat, a party with a political agenda resembling that of Turkey's Justice and Development Party, has been denied a license

to operate since 1995. If it is given the permission to operate, Wasat would attract a major section of the MB.

For things to change, the state and ruling party should embrace a measure of democracy. Then a full rejuvenation should begin in the ruling elite, infusing it with fresh blood and boosting its ability to compete for elected office in a democratic way. A true reform has to address the Islamic phenomenon in total transparency. And the Islamists must be encouraged to operate as a secular political current, one that is practical in its approach, not superior in its divinity.

Problems of the Islamists

Before they can be integrated in the process of democratisation, the Islamists have to do their homework. I am not saying that we need to test their commitment to democracy. If you ask me, the commitment to democracy is questionable in the case of most political groups in the Arab world, including the leftists. So we should focus on practical, not rhetorical, matters. Still, the Islamists must agree to play by the constitutional rules of the political game. They should stop thinking that being "Islamic" makes them "superior" to others. Many of the leaders and members of the peaceful Islamist currents imagine that their critics are ridiculing their faith. Many view criticism as an assault on their divinely-ordained ideals. This should end. The Islamists who see themselves as "guardians of the faith" suffer from a complex of superiority. They need to get over that. In politics, no one is immune from criticism. Those who win the public's trust are those who can deliver, not posture.

Concluding remarks:

- A. The more democratic a country becomes, the more the Islamists would interact with other political groups and the more interested in democracy and human rights they would become. Although differences of opinion would remain, dialogue between the EU and the Islamist forces would greatly encourage democratic and political progress.
- B. Secularism is part of the legacy of the modern Arab national state. This is why we find the Nasserists, in Egypt at least, at ease with the regime. On the contrary, the Islamists don't feel indebted to the modern national state. The Islamists in Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia, feel left out in the cold. Often, the Islamists are portrayed as the antithesis of the state. Often, they are hunted down by the state security services. And little is known about them aside from the stereotyped images offered by the state. This is why the "normalisation" between the Arab regimes and the Islamist current is not going to be easy. The legacy of the Islamists, especially the MB, was created outside the boundaries of the state and the national movement, with a good measure of antagonism with the regime. Consider for example the history of the Egyptian national movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and you'll see that the MB wasn't part of the picture. During the 1950s and 1960s, a time of national liberation, the MB was in conflict with the regime. Now it is time to include the Islamists into the country's future aspirations. This problem is not confined to Egypt. Hamas too has grown outside the legacy of the Palestinian national liberation movement, as represented by the PLO. Therefore, a formula must be found for incorporating Hamas into the Palestinian national liberation movement, intellectually as well as politically. Following the Israeli massacres in Gaza, this has become a particularly urgent task.
- C. The Islamic current often speaks in general and ambiguous terms. That's why it is essential for the Islamists to have a dialogue with the EU. Such a dialogue would encourage the Islamists to get a grip on details and use a more precise language. The MB often speaks of an Islamic cultural project, or asserts that "Islam is the solution", but it wouldn't get specific on such matters as the relations with America and the West and the position on Camp David. The MB is yet to define its position on the Christian community and on secularism. These are not things that can be discussed in general terms alone.
- D. Democratic political systems have a knack for turning global and integral ideologies into practical policies. This is not something that Islamic currents, with their sweeping modes of judgement, know how to do. But the world in which the Islamists live has changed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has shunned grand ideologies in favour of softer and more adaptable ones. The Islamists must understand that social engineering is a thing of the past. The MB has survived on ideology for too long, while convinced of its moral

superiority over others. Now it is time for it to understand that in politics one gets judged by the practice, not the ideals. In a democracy, you cannot win by religious Puritanism alone.

One wonders to what extent Islamic currents are aware of the changes around them. One wonders if the Islamists realise that democracy and its principles are more indispensable today than they were in the 1960s - during the surge of national liberation movements. The Islamists can do worse than embrace the "soft ideologies" of today, where the emphasis is on practical detail and flexibility. And they don't have to abandon their intellectual leanings to stay in the game.

- E. Peaceful Islamic currents are not a threat to the Arab region or the world. Islamists have a role to play in consolidating stability in the region. But there is a price that everyone must pay before the Islamists get aboard. Israel, for starters, should commit to UN resolutions and accept the creation of a Palestinian state. This would give the pragmatists within Hamas an edge over the ideologues and thus help integrate Hamas in the political and peaceful settlement. Therefore, international and European pressures must be brought on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. A change in Hamas' attitude could help change the mood among Islamists across the region. For their part, Arab regimes should introduce real reforms. Once Arab regimes have allowed the liberals and the leftists to be integrated in the political process, the integration of the Islamists would be smoother. So far, Arab regimes have tried to deal with the Islamists through the police. Now it is time to deal with them through politics. For this to happen, the Islamists should learn how to separate religion from politics. And they need to operate through a political party, not a religious society – for this is what the MB is at heart. In brief, the Islamists need to abide by democratic principles and the civilian constitution.