

Egyptian Islamists are not what they seem

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A democracy exists when, if one party wins an election, it is perfectly possible for another party to win a later election. Not every election is a herald of democracy. The sad phenomenon "one person, one vote, one time" describes the death of democracy.

What comes to mind are recent suggestions that it might be well to negotiate, converse, or deal with what is described as the moderate Islamists in Egypt. Presumably, this is a party representing a movement toward democracy, independent of the Hosni Mubarak regime. However, a little deeper reading uncovers the hard fact that the Islamists are merely the fair face of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood is an historic hard shell movement that has no respect or tolerance for democratic or Western values. The founder of the Brotherhood, Hassan Al Bana, called for "death for the infidels." The brotherhood's following is the progenitor of incidents (not at all approved by the average Egyptian) involving massacres of tourists or the assassination of Anwar Sadat. Of course the moderate Islamists talking to New York Times reporters or Harvard academics disavow any connection to such incidents. Nevertheless, the Islamists cannot deny their ideological roots in the Brotherhood.

Currently, the Egyptian government considers the Muslim Brotherhood an illegitimate organization. It is not allowed to directly run a candidate under its banner for election to the Egyptian parliament. However, a goodly number of candidates running as independents, but clearly affiliated with the Brotherhood, handily won seats in the 2005 election.

President Mubarak inherited his seat from Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Gamal Nasser. Sadat, in his time, moved away from Nasser's far-out nationalism, and tilted toward the West, made peace with Israel, and was assassinated by extreme religious elements. Mubarak has tried a middle course. He does not have Sadat's charisma, and anyway, Egypt is a difficult inheritance.

Egypt, with its population of 80 million, its historic universities, the cosmopolitan inheritance of Cairo, is the linchpin of the Arab world. It prides itself on its doctors, lawyers, professors, and writers. Yet, though the annual GDP has grown at a substantial rate since the 1950s, the growth in population is very high, and per capita income only grew at a modest rate. With a per capita GDP of about \$5,000, Egypt ranks better than most, but still among the poor countries of the world. Meanwhile, in spite of Egyptian claims to scholarship, the literacy rate remains at a mere 58 percent.

Mubarak relies on a center group of technicians, a more or less secular cadre of army officers, and a quiescent populace. The regime performs a balancing act. On occasion it appeases the Muslim right by suppressing left wing secular critics. It has allowed some leeway to the Muslim Brotherhood, but watches its activities closely and has refused to allow it to operate as a legal political party.

In spite of its repressive ideology, covert militancy and sporadic killings, the Brotherhood maintains a devoted following. Its founder in 1928 placed emphasis on serving the poor, setting up clinics and schools. Such programs (followed also by Hamas, the Brotherhood's terrorist Palestinian offspring) developed loyalty in much the same way that Tammany Hall, the Democratic party machine, held power in New York for many years.

The New Islamists portray themselves as different from the Muslim Brotherhood. They abstain from its endorsement of direct violence against those who confront true Muslims. These evil forces include the Jews, "the Crusaders" (foreign Christians), and most dangerously, the apostates (Muslim rulers who consort with outsiders and do not fully apply Muslim law to the affairs of the state). Nevertheless, the New Islamists, while professing moderation, seek much the same final goals as the Brotherhood, the abrogation of Western influence and the establishment of an Islamic republic governed by Sha'ria, Islamic law.

The Islamist leaders, stemming from an educated dissatisfied class of professions, doctors, lawyers, and teachers make a good impression when speaking to Western friends. Part of what they say is flavored by the strong Oriental social rule of not to give offense. They may sincerely believe in a policy of moderation, but like Iranian intellectuals, they make the mistake of riding on the wing of the militant Brotherhood, whose record includes political assassination. One might give advice to Mubarak on gradually moving toward more democracy. But the Egyptians might well take care in opening up to

the new Islamists, for in the end they are likely to be a stalking horse for the Muslim Brotherhood.

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