

Liberalizing the Muslim Brotherhood

Can It Be Done?

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Firstly, we must note that some object to the very question over whether the Muslim Brotherhood is turning into a liberal force. The notion contains a crucial flaw, since religious groups cannot be assessed based on shifting ideological frameworks. In other words, they argue that these groups be judged based on standards taking into consideration both the groups' characteristics and the characteristics of the cultural framework in which they operate. Most likely, this reservation is due to the debate in the Arab and Islamic world over the relationship between liberalism and secularism, and the substantial overlap between the two concepts. At its essence, these people do not believe that the Islamist movements – including the social movements – have truly accepted secularism as a prerequisite of becoming a liberal movement. They argue that there is a limit to how far the Islamist movements can go with regards to secularism, and so we should not expect the Islamist movements to become completely liberal in the Western understanding of liberalism, since they will not give up their religious nature which distinguishes them from nonreligious political movements.

However, with all due respect to this point of view, there are still others firmly believing in the compatibility of liberalism with a social movement retaining its religious character. One of the main prerequisites to transitioning from being a religious movement to a liberal religious movement is distinguishing between what is religious or evangelical, and what is political. This distinction is still lacking among many Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood. In this article, we evaluate

the Brotherhood in Egypt from this angle, through an analysis of a set of vital documents it has issued over the past five years.

From March 2004 to August 2007, the Muslim Brotherhood released four crucial documents dealing with the contemporary issues of political reform and elections in Egypt. The first is the Muslim Brotherhood Reform Initiative, declared on March 3, 2004. Coming second was the Brotherhood's electoral platform on the occasion of its participation (as independents) in the parliamentary elections in late 2005. The subsequent Shura Council elections prompted the Brotherhood to make public another electoral platform in May 2007. Finally, in August 2007, the Brotherhood gained attention with its draft party platform.

These documents are significant considering two factors, the first being the general context of heated debate on reform and electoral competition in Egypt in which the documents were created to help lay out the Brotherhood's stance on these issues. The second is the content of these documents, which incorporated a number of important concepts at least on the rhetorical level. The May 2007 Shura Council electoral platform was especially significant in two regards: firstly, because it was openly announced under the slogan "Islam is the Solution," despite the constitutional restrictions on using religious slogans in politics. The text of Article 5 of the constitution after being amended in March 2007 stipulates that "it is not permitted to pursue any political activity or establish political parties within any religious frame of reference (*marja'iyya*) or on any religious basis, or on the basis of discrimination due to gender or origin." Secondly, this document was released after the Brotherhood had begun discussing publicly issuing a party platform.

At the same time, a precise reading of the four documents – despite the key positive indicators they include – shows a degree of uncertainty and confusion within the Brotherhood. Also, none of the documents managed to solve the two fundamental problems lingering over the group: the suspicion towards them on the part of most political players in Egypt and the vagueness in its positions towards a list of crucial issues. Furthermore, the documents were unable to provide a solid reason for the Brotherhood to keep creating electoral platforms under the slogan "Islam is the Solution," since they had little to distinguish themselves from the other reform initiatives from political opposition groups, with the exception of a handful of economic and social points, or spiritual and religious aspects.

The previous shortcomings can be traced back to a number of factors, most prominently the fact that the Brotherhood still does not draw a line between its religious and political functions, as we will discuss in more detail.

Political Reform as Part of the Brotherhood's Religious Function

Despite the broad consensus between the Brotherhood and the other political parties in Egypt on the centrality of reform, a close reading of the documents, statements and interviews by the Brotherhood's leading figures reveals that there is still a good deal of overlap between its religious and political functions, such that political reform is viewed as part of religious reform. This is illustrated by the following:

1. The 2004 reform initiative was launched on a religious basis and described as being part of its duty to "pass on advice to society." Even though the Brotherhood did not deny that national and patriotic duty was also an important motivation for the initiative, this still came in second place beyond religious responsibility. With the initiative's religious basis, the Brotherhood missed a chance to refute one of the central critiques of the Islamist movements in general, namely that they claim to hold a monopoly over the truth. Even though the initiative reaffirmed the Brotherhood's faith in democratic and liberal ideas, it was introduced "out of faith that we are calling God's call, the most divine call, and championing Islam, the most correct philosophy, and we are presenting to the people the legislation of the Quran, which is the most just legislation – '(Our religion is) the Baptism of God: And who can baptize better than God? And it is He Whom we worship' (the Quran, 2:138). We believe that the whole world in general, and ourselves in particular, are in need of this call and anything which can pave the way for it." At another point, the initiative reads: "Taking as a starting point the verse 'I desire nothing but reform so far as I am able' (the Quran, 11:88), we argue that the goal of our call is true, comprehensive reform on which we must all cooperate. ...in order to set up God's law and in that is the welfare of the world and religion. 'Then we put thee on the (right) Way of Religion: so follow thou that (Way), and follow not the whims of those who know not' (the Quran, 45:18)." Thus, we can see that the initiative blurs the line between political vision and religious preaching.
2. Regarding the outlines of the Brotherhood's conception of political reform, it is based on four points: (i) the rejection of externally imposed reform initiatives, or measures taken under foreign pressure. The Brotherhood is deeply suspicious of the real goals behind foreign-imposed reform programs and does not believe them to be in the interest of the region's peoples so much as they "primarily aim to continue U.S. hegemony and control over the region's

wealth and destiny, the supremacy of the Zionist entity which is usurping the land of Palestine, and planting governments that are more cooperative with it in its overall strategy.”

3. The final goal of reform is setting up God’s law through developing the Muslim individual, household, government and state to lead the other Islamic states. This was also affirmed by the draft party platform, which mentioned that one of its goals was having the constitution’s second article “include all levels of legislation” (Muslim Brotherhood Draft Party Platform, Chapter 2).

Unclear Understanding of the Civil State

It should be noted that the 2004 reform initiative avoided openly using the concept of the “Islamic state” or “Islamic government,” but that the idea was still implicitly present in the initiative’s discussions of “the state which leads the Islamic states” and “Muslim government.” However, the Shura Council electoral platform was blunter in its use of the term “the Islamic state,” which it labeled as a fundamental ends and means, and necessary to “protect [Islam], and stick to its program.” In this regard, Islam is no different from “the liberal solution, which must have a state to enact it,

protect it and stick to its program.”

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Nonetheless, all of the Brotherhood’s documents were careful to assert the civil nature of the state, described in the 2007 Shura Council electoral platform: “Its official religion is Islam, and Islamic Shariah is its principal source of laws and provisions...a state in which the rulers and the umma [Islamic nation or community] are integrated, for it is the umma which puts the rulers in power, holds them accountable, and can remove him whenever it is in its interest. For

he is a civilian ruler in all aspects, and its government is civil, unrelated to the theocratic state.”

In the 2007 electoral platform, the Brotherhood also went out of its way to emphasize three other important guarantees: that Islam by nature rejects religious authority, “since the state in Islam is a civil state with its systems and institutions put in place by the umma, and in which the umma represents the source of authority,” and human *ijtihad* [independent reasoning] within the framework of the immutable points

of Islamic Shariah is not forbidden. The second guarantee is that “Islam does not have religious authority for anyone.” Finally, the third is that “the ruler’s authority is derived from the social contract between the ruler and subject, enacted by the umma.” In addition to the draft party platform reasserting these guarantees, the draft also promised that the application of Islamic Shariah itself would take place through “the vision which the umma agrees upon, through a parliamentary majority in the freely elected legislative authority.”

Despite all of these guarantees, the draft party platform aggravated suspicions about the Brotherhood’s understanding of a civil state when it proposed setting up a “body of senior religious scholars” as a supreme independent source of reference reviewing all legislation to make sure that it is compatible with Islamic Shariah. This idea triggered sharp debate and fueled suspicions of the Brotherhood, since the political system which the Brotherhood was proposing in this regard resembled the Iranian *wilayat al-faqih* jurisprudential system: the body of religious scholars would be independent from the legislative and executive branches, and its decisions would be binding, without the option of the legislative branch overriding its veto except in cases where Shariah has no clear, final and fixed rulings. Naturally, determining whether or not Shariah has these precedents is left up to the religious body, not the legislative or executive branch.

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Meanwhile, despite the draft party platform reasserting that the head of state and legislative branch are entrusted with the application of Islamic Shariah throughout domestic and foreign policies, the draft also gives any stakeholder the right to appeal before the constitutional court that “any of these laws, decisions, and policies contradict the rulings of Islamic Shariah agreed upon by modern jurists.” Without a doubt, this huge expansion in the right of appeal would create chaos in decision-making, especially given the range of interpretations of Quranic verses and varying jurisprudential opinions on any given article.

Economics: Reducing Islamic Regulations to Banning Interest

All four documents to varying degrees also addressed the Brotherhood’s stances on nonpolitical (economic, social and cultural) issues, though the Shura Council electoral platform and the draft party platform were the most comprehensive. Nonetheless, with

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The draft party platform was more explicit in discussing the Islamic economic system. In general, the Brotherhood's economic system can be outlined in the following points:

- Restructuring the financial system through two principal mechanisms: abolishing the "usury system" (the interest rate) and converting the banks and financial institutions into investment institutions, such that their function is

Belief in the idea of class distinction within society, and even "making sure to protect the wealthy and poor classes alike."

to invest deposits and other financial instruments, rather than trading in money through interest rate-bearing loans. The platform reaffirmed the Islamic investment models, particularly *musharika* (venture capital), *al-buyu'* (sales) and *al-ijara* (leasing) contracts.

The Brotherhood's stance is based on the belief that profit is the product of the relationship between capital and labor, i.e. the product of investing capital in economic work, and consequently it rejects the idea of profiting by trading in money and currency.

- Preserving the state's socioeconomic role, since the state is "the guider, planner, completer, and responsible for handling crises," and in charge of fighting exploitation, monopolies and scams, as well as controlling prices, safeguarding the poor and managing Islamic endowments. The state is responsible for generally achieving balance in the economic system (public/private, manufacturing/service, agriculture/industry, heavy/consumer industry, rural/urban areas, allowing imports and developing exports, and finally Arab integration/ Islamic integration).
- Belief in the idea of class distinction within society and even "making sure to protect the wealthy and poor classes alike." The state ensures that the wealthy fulfilled their obligations to the poor through zakat, charity and taxes, as key financial tools not with the goal of achieving class equality in society but rather so as to ensure a dignified lifestyle for the poor. With this exception, the Brotherhood's economic position is hardly different from the leftist political parties, which generally believe in an interventionist state cooperating with

the private sector, inspired by the experiences of East Asia in the second half of the 20th century.

“Islam is the Solution”: Questions and Gray Areas

Despite some positive developments on reform in the four Brotherhood documents, and an attempt to give the slogan “Islam is the Solution” a practical meaning, they still revealed the continued existence of significant problems and gray areas. These issues, some related to the Brotherhood itself and others to the word choice and content within its reformist rhetoric, were tied to the fundamental point of contention – the secular political forces’ instinct that the Brotherhood was not ready to adopt a rhetoric that was more political than religious. The encouraging aspects in these documents included the following:

- the vow to maintain a democratic, parliamentary political system;
- promising to work through legal and constitutional channels;
- acknowledging that the people are the source of authority;
- rejecting the idea of the absolute right of any group or party to assume power or stay in power without the will of the people;
- the principle of the transition of power through direct, free elections;
- other related issues such as freedom of belief, opinion, assembly, formation of political parties and ownership of the media;
- a shift in thinking from didactic religious content to a more comprehensive approach to reform addressing politics, the economy, the state’s role in production, unemployment, civil society, health, education, research, youth, women, children, Copts, culture, media, foreign policy, etc.

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In general terms, the ideas discussed in the Brotherhood documents revealed the evolution of a comprehensive, multidimensional program to handle the problems in Egyptian society in general, and reform in particular. However, this upside does not negate the fact that the documents failed to overcome the negative perceptions about the Brotherhood held by the other political players, or lurking suspicions that the Brotherhood has a hidden agenda on various issues. These issues include some addressed in the documents, but the occasional contradiction between the Brotherhood’s

written and verbal rhetoric, stemming from sharp internal disagreements, damaged the credibility of its reformist rhetoric, or at least delayed its completion until any possible evolution within the organization is complete.¹

The following are the most significant problems raised by the Brotherhood's rhetoric:

(1) The stance towards political and religious diversity. The Brotherhood's electoral platform only addressed religious diversity, represented by the Copts, by backing some general principles (such as considering the Copts part of the fabric of Egyptian society allowed to carry out their lives in peace; affirming freedom of belief and worship; emphasizing the spirit of brotherhood; and asserting the importance of national

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unity). However, this did not rise to the level of controversy over the broader religious current's stance towards Coptic-Muslim relations, not only should the Brotherhood come to power, but also given some of the problems in the relations which have arisen from time to time, as well as the discrepancies between written documents and verbal statements. The initiative's position towards Copts' political rights in general remained murky, particular the ceiling to those rights and the stance on some specific Coptic demands.

This rhetoric, combined with the results which the Brotherhood achieved in the parliamentary elections, quickly prompted tough Coptic counter-rhetoric against the Brotherhood initiative's basis for Muslim-Coptic relations, "brotherhood" (since the initiative's section on Copts was entitled "the Coptic brothers," and the initiative repeatedly spoke of inter-religious "brotherhood"). The Coptic response argued that there was a big difference between the "brotherhood" proposed by the Brotherhood, and the "citizenship" that should govern the relations between Muslims and Copts.

Some Coptic figures also question how committed the Brotherhood would be to the principle of citizenship in its relationship with the Copts should it come to power, seeing as religious affiliation is more important for the Brotherhood than national af-

¹ Some argue however that the relative contradiction between the statements of Brotherhood figures on the political party's issues, the slogan "Islam is the Solution," and the stance towards the West and Israel does not reflect internal division as much as it reflects a distribution of roles to preserve the group's balance. See for example: "Al-tasrihat al-mutadariba li-qiyadat al-ikhwan..inshiqaq am tabadul adwar" ("The Contradictory Statements by Brotherhood Leaders: Split or Exchange of Roles?"), Al-Masry Al-Yaum, January 7, 2006, 5.

filiation, and the Copts would turn “either into ahl al-dhimma [protected religious minorities] or second or third-class citizens.”² A number of Coptic leaders have even advocated emigration should the Brotherhood come to power.

The Brotherhood had tried in a subsequent stage to deal with the weaknesses of these two reformist documents, responding to the criticism directed at the Brotherhood in a number of statements. The deputy guide, Mohamed Habib, said that “the Copts have all rights, duties and citizenship rights, as they are first-class citizens,”³ and “they have all citizenship rights and are part of this society’s fabric and we have shared decisions and destinies, and the standards through which positions are assumed is according to competence and ability, not religion, creed or gender, with the exception of the president of the republic, who must be a Muslim since we are an Islamic country, in keeping with Article 2 of the constitution.”⁴ Habib also said that the ahl al-dhimma question had ended with the official ID card given by the state to citizens. Finally, the general guide also stated that Coptic issues would be taken up within the new parliament.

The 2007 Shura Council electoral platform did not make much progress in this regard, since the section on Copts within the first chapter of the platform simply reasserted the content of the reform initiative, only shortening the headline from “Regarding the Coptic Brothers” to “Copts,” perhaps in response to the aforementioned criticism. There were also some limited other amendments, such as removing Article 3: “They have what we have, and they have to do what we have to do” and adding in an article: “They are equals to their Muslim brothers in all rights and duties, and in assuming government jobs on the basis of competence and specialization.” The other items, meanwhile, remained the same without any pivotal changes, including the article on preserving the spirit of brotherhood, which was changed to “Egyptian brotherhood.” In the platform, the term “citizenship” remained absent from the section on the Copts.

Contrary to the issue with religious plurality, Brotherhood rhetoric saw noticeable positive development regarding political diversity, whether for parties in the opposition or the government. The Brotherhood has been critical of an important segment of the cultural elite, blaming it for perpetuating the political deadlock in Egypt, and either

2 Henna, Milad. “misr wa hukm al-ikhwan..hal sayadi’ amal al-ta’ayush bayna al-muslimene wa al-aqbat?” (“Egypt and Brotherhood Rule: Will Hopes for Coexistence between Muslims and Copts be Lost?”), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 27, 2005, 14.

3 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 6, 2005, 8.

4 *Al-Masry al-Yaum*, December 6, 2005. Also see Mohamed al-Sayyed Habib, “Hukm al-ikhwan ghayr warid.. wa lakin hakadha natasawwar al-hukm,” (“Brotherhood Rule is Out of the Question, But this is how We Envision the Rule would be”), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 27, 2005, 14.

avoiding constitutional reforms or voiding them of their content. However, this did not prevent the Brotherhood from calling on the various political forces and cultural elite across the spectrum to play their role in managing the constitutional amendment process, as well as using different constitutional rights for peaceful political action and

freedoms of opinion and expression.⁵

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The Brotherhood went even further when it acknowledged the difficulty of a political force taking up the responsibility of governing Egypt or managing the political reform process alone, and that the practical alternative is ruling the country with a “coalition incorporating all of the political factions.”⁶

However, this stance, in combination with what was mentioned in its reformist initiative, which called upon action based on the common denominators between all of the political forces, did not eliminate some political players’ mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood.

An important question can be asked in this context: Do the positive developments in the Brotherhood’s rhetoric towards political pluralism reflect liberalism taking hold within the group, and seeing itself as just one of many political alternatives? Or is it merely a political tactic – resorting to using liberal terminology given internal political transformations and an international environment which accepts no alternative to this liberal rhetoric - from a religious movement still looking for a legitimate political existence?

In reality, we still cannot offer a precise answer to this crucial question, as can be shown by two fundamental points. Firstly, there are important transformations within the Brotherhood and a faction trying to renew its political and religious rhetoric, while confronting a more conservative faction. Secondly, the Brotherhood has clearly fathomed the nature of the current political balances and that it cannot come to power in the foreseeable future. Proving this understanding, Dr. Issam el-Aryan argued that the Brotherhood at present is not trying to gain power, but rather wants a transitional stage and clear timetable for comprehensive economic and political reform, and is aspiring through that transitional stage to not ignore any of the other political move-

5 “Al-ikhwan yutalibun bi-tashkil lajna ‘ulya min al-fuqaha’ li-ta’dil al-dustour” (“Brotherhood Demands Formation of Supreme Jurists’ Council to Amend Constitution”), *Afaq ‘Arabiya*, no. 702, March 31, 2005.

6 “Hukm misr yahtaju ila tahaluf watani min jami’ al-fasa’il al-siyasiya” (“Governing Egypt Requires a National Coalition of All the Political Factions”), *Afaq ‘Arabiya*, no. 702, March 31, 2005.

ments.⁷ Mohamed Habib also asserted that the Brotherhood could not rule Egypt any time soon.⁸ This recognition of the Brotherhood is significant because it makes it difficult for it to use exclusionary rhetoric against the political other.

(2) The second problem is the stance of the Brotherhood's reformist rhetoric towards the outside world, since it is still based on suspicion towards foreign intentions in promoting reforming. In the Brotherhood's view, reform from abroad could only aim at "U.S. hegemony and control over the region's wealth and destiny, the supremacy of the Zionist entity which is usurping the land of Palestine, and planting governments that are more cooperative with it."⁹

Meanwhile, this rhetoric still has strong elements of conflict with the West, as seen by the initiative retaining the idea of freeing occupied Arab lands through Islamic jihad, making it difficult to create an objective dialogue between the Brotherhood and the West – assuming that the United States and the West aspire to mold the Brotherhood in the model of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. The sources of conflict are not restricted to political sources only, but they include economic sources also, in light of the argument by some Brotherhood leaders that foreign economic choices should be linked to national security considerations, especially when looking at the proposed U.S.-Middle East free trade zone, American aid and the QIZ agreement.

Conclusion

Based on the previous, we can say that it is unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood itself will transform its rhetoric or even itself into that of a liberal party. This conclusion is backed by two facts:

1 – Comparing the Brotherhood's reformist rhetoric with liberal rhetoric in general, we note the relative rapprochement between the two sides – at least on the rhetorical level – regarding accepting the principles of democracy, the peaceful change of power, considering the people the source of authority, accepting the principle of utilitarianism (meaning here acknowledging individual rights and class differences). However, disagreement remains regarding two important principles. The first is the

7 "Qiyadat al-ikhwan: ladayna jadwal zamani lil-islah al-iqtisadi" ("Brotherhood Leaders: We have a Timetable for Economic Reform"), Al-Masry Al-Yaum, December 18, 2005, 5.

8 Habib, Mohamed Al-Sayyed. "Hukm al-ikhwan ghayr warid..wa lakin hakadha natasawwar al-hukm," ("Brotherhood Rule is Out of the Question, But this is how we Envision the Rule would be"), Al-Sharq al-Awsat, November 27, 2005, 14.

9 Muslim Brotherhood Reform Initiative, *ibid.* See also Dr. Issam al-Eryan's view in "Qiyadat al-ikhwan: ladayna jadwal zamani lil-islah al-iqtisadi" ("Brotherhood Leaders: We have a Timetable for Economic Reform"), Al-Masry Al-Yaum, December 18, 2005, 5.

principle of secularism, meaning the separation between religious institutions and the other political, economic, judicial, administrative and civil society institutions as civil, not religious institutions. The second principle is the principle of rationalism, meaning marginalizing texts, utilizing the human mind, and submitting everything to the logic of reason, based on the view that the human mind has reached a level of maturity

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allowing it to look after its interests and worldly activities without outside tutorage. This is one of the fundamental principles of the liberal school of thought, and is difficult to expect from the Muslim Brotherhood in the near future. This brings us back again to the stipulation mentioned at the beginning of the article, namely that the transformation

of the Muslim Brotherhood to a liberal movement must be based on a specified understanding of liberalism taking into consideration the intrinsic nature of the Islamist movements compared to the secular political movements.

2 – Comparing the Brotherhood’s reformist rhetoric with the reality of the reform process within the group itself, we notice that even though its reform initiative labeled “political deadlock, corruption and social oppression, and scientific and technical backwardness” to be “the destructive trinity for the umma,” the movement itself suffers from the same political immobility. The Brotherhood’s old guard maintains its tight grip on power even as the group criticizes political immobility in Egypt and tries to adopt open, liberal rhetoric asserting its commitment and respect for the principle of the transfer of power through direct, public elections.

The Brotherhood has not yet succeeded in applying those principles to its own internal mechanism, especially in selecting the general guide. The process is actually quite similar to the election of the Egyptian president through referendum. The decision-makers within the Brotherhood choose the candidate according to their calculations (much as the Egyptian People’s Assembly used to meet to name the presidential candidate, until the recent constitutional amendment to Article 76). Next comes the process of proclaiming loyalty by the movement’s rank and file (like the general referendum for the People’s Assembly’s candidate). Perhaps it would be wiser for the Brotherhood to begin applying democratic mechanisms within its internal structure.

Likewise, when the group started an internal debate over reform on the shared basis of liberal values, it should have allowed leaders to emerge from the middle generation which has built up crucial political experience in unions, syndicates and the

People's Assembly, so as to add more credibility to its reformist rhetoric, instead of the old guard maintaining its grip on power. (The current general guide is Mohammed Mahdi Akef, born in 1928, and a longtime Brotherhood powerbroker.) Additionally, there is a worrisome lack of self-criticism and review within the Brotherhood, though this process is underway with other Egyptian Islamist groups known for greater ideological and organization centralization (al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and Islamic Jihad). ■