

Islamists and the Egyptian revolution

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Any discussion of the status of Islamists in a new Egypt makes little sense if it's based on the same data that was previously used to study religious movements, and if it ignores the fact that Egypt has witnessed a revolution that destroyed many of the old features of its religious scene.

The revolution was not just directed against the autocratic, repressive and corrupt Egyptian regime, which relied on an alliance of money, power and corruption. It was also directed against the official religious establishment and its discourse that supports this regime, either directly or indirectly.

The Egyptian revolution has completely reconfigured the religious scene and clarified the public's position towards religious institutions and discourses in the country. The result has been surprising. No one expected that religious Egyptians are capable of overriding the powers of religious institutions and of challenging religious discourses that they suddenly perceived as part of a corrupt and repressive regime.

The official religious establishments—both Islamic and Christian—have been the biggest losers in the revolution. Al-Azhar was late in addressing the situation. Ahmed al-Tayyib, the Grand Sheikh, waited a long time before making statements that departed from his unequivocal support for the regime. But these statements did not measure up to the revolution. As an official religious institution that is wholly connected to the state—structurally and financially—Al-Azhar did not change its discourse very much after the revolution.

Al-Azhar called for calm when the revolution reached its peak. It rejected Egyptian “in-fighting”—ignoring that what happened was a shameful attack orchestrated by the regime with the help of criminals and thugs. Al-Azhar issued vague statements about the need to end the revolution, but made no mention of the regime. Al-Azhar's only redeeming stance was to invite youth activists for a dialogue. Also, Al-Azhar's official spokesperson Mohammed Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, submitted his resignation and allied himself with the protesters and several preachers joined the protesters in their unique attire.

For its part, the Grand Mufti's Office did everything possible to provide a religious cover for the regime. Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa issued an edict on the “Friday of Departure” (February 4) barring Muslims from praying in mosques.

Fourteen days into the revolution, it has become clear that the public has paid little attention to the Islamic religious establishment. Aware that Gomaa's edicts are politically motivated (like his earlier pronouncements that youth who die while emigrating illegally are committing suicide and cannot be considered martyrs), protesters ignored Gomaa's words.

The position of the most prominent Christian religious institution, the Coptic Church, has been the most blatantly biased toward the regime. Pope Shenouda opposed the 25 January protests and called on Copts not to participate. He maintained this position throughout the revolution, openly declaring his support for Mubarak. Many Copts still took to the streets, refusing to abide by the Pope's directives. The revolution came as Copts had been mounting the biggest challenge of the Church and its monopoly over the representation of Egypt's Christians. Tens of articles were being written

over the last few months arguing that Christian voices must be heard outside the Church, in political parties and programs. The participation of Christians, especially Christian youth, in these protests constitutes another revolution—one that is directed against the Church that has used a sectarian discourse to isolate Copts from the street and to rally Christians behind Mubarak's regime on grounds that it offers guarantees to the Christian community.

Much like the Egyptian people succeeded in overriding state-supported religious institutions, they have also succeeded in overriding Salafi groups that were clearly supportive of the regime. Many salafis opposed the revolution and the principle of political opposition more broadly, which the regime tried to use to its favor. Salafis unanimously boycotted the revolution, claiming it was sedition. They accepted decades of injustice, but rejected the revolution. The revolution revealed an unintended alliance between the Mubarak regime and the Salafi movement. On the one hand, this movement is backed by elements in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, its members are periodically subjected to harassment by the regime. However, the regime does not see this as completely eliminating its alliance with the movement, as long as the movement continues to support the regime politically.

One of the paradoxes of the Egyptian revolution is that a regime that had just recently banned Salafi TV channels and accused them of inciting sectarian conflict reversed its position and employed Salafi sheikhs in its war against the revolution. This time, Salafi sheikhs and figures, such as Mohammed Hassan, Mahmoud Al-Masri, Mostafa al-Adawi, appeared on state television and private channels close to the regime. They called for an end to protests, using arguments about security and the dangers of sedition. Some went as far as questioning the patriotism of those who instigated the revolution, arguing that it was an American-Zionist conspiracy or akin to the Iranian revolution. The manipulative statements of Iranian leaders in support of the Egyptian uprising further contributed to the Salafi counterattack.

The position of Salafis toward the Egyptian revolution comes as no surprise, especially as they have a history of supporting the regime. The famous Salafi edict to kill prominent reform advocate Mohammed ElBaradei is proof. The same sheikh issued an edict banning nominations against President Mubarak in the 2005 presidential elections on grounds that Mubarak was the commander of the faithful. What's surprising, however, is the position of Salafis in Alexandria. This school is among the most independent from the regime and has sometimes even opposed it. Its members have been subjected to tight security measures and arrest campaigns. These campaigns peaked following the attack on the Two Saints Church in Alexandria on New Year 's Eve. Hundreds of Salafis were arrested and one died as a result of torture. Despite this, the Salafs in Alexandria (and across various other governorates) opposed the revolution, going as far as closing down some mosques on the "Friday of Departure." They stoked fears about the threat other political currents—a possible reference to ElBaradei's National Association for Change—posed to the Islamic identity.

Salafis are the strongest source of religious support—direct and indirect—for the regime at the moment. But this means the future of the Salafi movement is on the line. On the one hand, the revolution's triumph over the Salafi movement might lead Salafis to revise their positions. On the other hand, if the revolution is unable to achieve its democratic aspirations, the Salafi movement may reassert its old position with the backing of the regime.

Surely, this analysis includes a great deal of generalization with regards to the Salafi movement. The fact that the Salafi movement was generally opposed to the revolution and allied with the regime does not mean that there were no Salafi voices in favor of revolution. Some voices have taken a progressive stance against the regime, perhaps even more radical than many liberals and leftists. This was particularly true of the Islah Party project, advocated by Salafi politicians like Gamal Sultan in the late 1990s.

The rest of the political forces comprising the Islamist current are divided into armed Jihadi groups that fought against the regime for decades before renouncing violence, and peaceful groups, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood.

With the exception of a statement by Jihadi leaders Abud and Tarik Al-Zumur in support of the revolution, Al-Jamaat Al-Islamiya and the rest of the Jihadis that renounced violence called for the end of the revolution. Al-Jamaat refused to bring down Mubarak and expressed its satisfaction with his intention not to seek another term in office. Al-Jamaat leaders also insisted on the group's participation in any political dialogue, even though it had not participated in the revolution. The regime immediately accepted Al-Jamaat's request. This can be seen as part of the regime's strategy to include many different political forces in a dialogue to discuss demands that are not those of the revolution.

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood, continues to participate in protests and has not yet pulled out. Despite this, however, there was a significant shift in the Brotherhood's position in the past few days after the group agreed to participate in a national dialogue with Mubarak is still in power. This effectively means the Brotherhood has conceded on its demand for the president's immediate departure, and that it has entered into a dialogue in accordance with the regime's conditions.

Many harbor the usual doubts that the Brotherhood remains close to the regime, even as it revolts on the street. There are always great pressures governing the Brotherhood's relationship to the state, most notably its desire to become a legal political movement. There is also a desire to translate the gains of the revolution into tangible improvements in the Brotherhood's political and legal standing, both domestically and abroad, especially after the movement was invited to join the national dialogue as any other legal political party.

Many in the Brotherhood seem to be acting with a pre-revolutionary mentality, as if no revolution has taken place and as if the regime is still strong. They are failing to ask themselves whether they should fully embrace the demands of the revolution. This is a problem, for it sets limits on what the revolution can achieve rather than thinking about the possibilities that it offers.

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P.S.

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<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/opinion/islamists-and-egyptian-revolution>