

Religion and politics in Egypt today: Ideological Trends and Future Prospects

Elizabeth Iskander

The sudden opening up of political space since the uprising of 25 January 2011 began has given visibility to the range of political and religious streams of thought that exist in the Arab world's most populous country. Although Egypt's uprising was largely about reclaiming political agency and social justice for the Egyptian people, religion has contributed to the shape of Egypt's struggle to redefine itself since the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. Under Mubarak the political scene was often presented in black and white terms as being divided between religious extremists (then normally represented by the Muslim Brotherhood) and Mubarak's National Democratic Party. The latter was represented as the only force preventing Egypt from becoming a radical theocracy. This covered over the diversity that is now apparent. It is clear that Islamists are a powerful political force, yet they also face broad and varied opposition and do not represent the only ideological trend to emerge. Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood did not have an easy victory in Egypt's presidential election in June 2012 and continues to face open and direct criticism. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power has caused alarm among sections of the Egyptian population and the international community. Evidently, the effect of religion on the political transition in Egypt cannot be ignored if the dynamics of the social and political changes are to be understood.

The 25 January uprising and sectarianism

On 25 January 2011, antigovernment protests set in motion an 18-day protest period, which eventually brought Mohamed Hosni Mubarak's 30 year rule to an end. These dramatic events seemed to hold the promise of more far-reaching changes in the structure of the Egyptian political system than simply removing its head. This promise gave many Egyptians cause for both hope

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and fear. One of the most audible fears was that Egypt would transform into a theocracy run by radical Islamists. Yet among the most positive scenes to emerge during the demonstrations was the solidarity of Egyptians, regardless of their religious beliefs and the clear determination not to let the protests be transformed into a religious protest movement. The slogan 'Muslim, Christian, we are all Egyptian' could be seen on placards and heard during chanting.¹ Consequently, during the protests, the Muslim Brotherhood did not have a prominent role despite their long history in political opposition to the state.

However, religious diversity, rather than acting as a strength, has often been a weakness in Egyptian society.² The 25 January protests came just weeks after a bomb exploded outside a church in Alexandria in the early hours of New Year's Day 2011. After the revolution a series of attacks on Christians and churches seemed to confirm the fears of many, both among Muslims and non-Muslims, that Mubarak's ouster had opened up a security gap that would be exploited by militant Islamic groups. On 4 March 2011 a church in the town of Atfeeh was attacked and burned down; in May 2011 two churches in the Imbaba district of Cairo were attacked and burned down in a 15 hour stand off that left 15 people dead; in September 2011 a church in Edfu near Aswan was attacked, leading to a surge of protests by Copts; in October 2011 these protests against the attack on the church themselves came under fire by soldiers reacted aggressively to a march headed to the Maspero area of Cairo. At least 24 people were shot or crushed under vehicles. During this incident, state media called on 'honourable men' to protect the army against the Copts.³

While this series of violent attacks does seem to have originated in the post-revolution climate of instability and uncertainty as well as increased confidence of some Islamist radicals, this type of violence, with the exception of the clash between soldiers and protesters in October, were not extraordinary occurrences. Neither has the state response to apparent sectarian tensions changed, and so justice is rarely found. In February 2012, a family of Copts were told they would be forcibly evicted from their homes in Amriya when attacks were launched on the family and their property after a video allegedly showing one of the family with a Muslim woman was circulated. Rather than seeking to prosecute the perpetrators of the attacks, a reconciliation meeting was held. These meetings had been used during Mubarak's presidency, with the support of late Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church, as a way to end sectarian clashes quickly and quietly. They were part of a broader policy to gloss over the existence of a sectarian problem in Egypt and to bring any clashes to a swift end.⁴ While this approach often put a swift end to a

¹ El-Shenawi, E. (12 October 2011) The sectarian divide is Egypt's Achilles heel, al-Arabiya, available on: <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/12/171494.html>>.

² Iskander, E. (13 October 2011) Sectarianism, Post-Mubarak Egypt's Achilles Heel, available on: <<http://iskanders.wordpress.com/2011/10/13/religious-prejudice-post-mubarak-egypts-achilles-heel/>>.

³ Cf. Iskander, E. (2012) *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*, London, Routledge.

⁴ Cf. Hulsman, C. (1 March 2003) Muslims Convicted After 2000 Fatal Attack on Copts' Christianity Today, available on: <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/marchweb-only/3-3-11.0.html>>.

violent incident, these meetings meant that justice was rarely achieved for the victims of attacks and bypassing the courts avoided any open discussion of the problem. This has only supported the intractability of the tendency for social tensions to take the form of sectarian violence between Muslim and Christian communities.

The emerging Islamist scene after Mubarak

For many of those who participated in the uprisings, it was for democracy not for an Islamic state that they were mobilized. However, the uprising has passed into the period of transition and the transition is far more dictated by Egypt's social and political history and composition and it is the 'religion question' that dominates many of the debates about Egypt's future. In post-Mubarak Egypt, there has been a dramatic reversal in the discourse of the Egyptian nation and particularly its relationship with Islamism. During the Mubarak era, the government was portrayed as the protector of the nation and of moderate Islam against radical Islam and terrorism. Now the Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in the parliamentary elections and Morsi's election as president appear to have placed power in the Muslim Brotherhood's hands.

However, this result neither means that all Egyptian's want to see an Islamic state that implements full Sharia law, nor does it mean that the Muslim Brotherhood is the only group representing Egypt's Islamist political scene. After the decline of the militant Islamist groups under Mubarak's crackdown in the 1990s, Egypt's Islamic activist scene had been dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood style of social and political activism but there had been clear indications that a more conservative trend was reasserting itself in addition to the Brotherhood even before 2011 but the uprising clearly altered the landscape and facilitated the return of more conservative Islamic streams into Egyptian politics. This includes groups labeled as 'Salafist', which have come to represent the danger of radical Islamist rule in the general Egyptian public consciousness, replacing the Muslim Brotherhood who seem comparatively moderate. The Salafists, mainly represented politically by the al-Nour party, were surprise runners up in the parliamentary election and their disqualified presidential candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail had a vocal and well organised support-base.

Rise of Salafism?

Since the uprising there has been a clear upsurge in the visibility of groups labeled Salafist in the public space. In popular discourse, Salafism has become almost an umbrella term to mean Islamic figures and parties that are perceived as more conservative in their aims than the Muslim Brotherhood. This overuse of the term causes problems in the definition and understanding of the term Salafi, which actually stems from the 'al-Salaf al-Saleh' meaning the 'good predecessors'. This refers to the original Muslim community during the life of Mohammed and the leaders that came immediately after him. This period is considered to be the perfect Islamic

society because it was established by Mohammed and those in his immediate circle. To recapture this period, Salafists seek to base their faith primarily upon the Quran and Sunna (example of Mohamed's life) and so tend to reject innovation and pluralism. Although there may be doctrinal convergence, interpretation of sources and the practice of these principles can be radically divergent, causing confusion regarding Salafist ideology.⁵

A scholar of Salafism Quintan Wiktorowicz, divides Salafists into three broad categories:⁶

- Purists, who believe in non-violent propagation of their creed through education and purification ;
- Politicos, who seek to apply the Salafi approach in the political arena ;
- Jihadis, who believe that militant methods are justifiable to implement their beliefs.

According to this categorization, it seems that it is the politico Salafists that have become the most obvious trend in Egypt. They have become more visible through the establishment of political parties and through restarting satellite broadcasting but again this does not mean it is a new trend. In 2006, Salafi satellite stations had already begun broadcasting in Egypt and attracted large audiences.⁷ Many of the channels were shut down in late 2010, shortly before elections and during a period of heightened sectarian tensions when the channels had been used to insult the Coptic Church and its Pope.⁸ After the uprising, the channels came back on air. In July 2012, broadcasting began of a new channel called Maria TV. The channel, founded by a Salafist sheikh Abu Islam Ahmed Abdullah, is produced and presented only by women wearing the niqab.⁹ Speaking about his motivation for founding the station, Abdullah told a BBC interviewer that the name of the channel was chosen to represent the transformation of Maria, a Coptic slave woman apparently given in marriage to the prophet, "from the status of slave under the Church to a free woman with the Muslim community."¹⁰ The channel has been criticised by other Salafists, who claim that even completely veiled women should not appear on camera and that their voices should not be heard. The idea for the channel was not new so it also cannot be considered a trend emerging out of the

⁵ Lauzière, H. (August 2010) 'The Construction of *Salafiyya*: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, pp.369-389, p.371

⁶ Wiktorowicz, Q. (2006) Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, pp.207-239, p. 208

⁷ Field, N. & A. Hamam, (2009) 'Salafi satellite TV in Egypt', *Arab media and Society*, p. 6

⁸ Iskander, E. (4 November 2010). *Middle East Feature: Behind Iraq's Church Attack, Religious Tensions in Egypt*, *EA Worldview*.

⁹ Klaiber, S. (24 July 2012) Maria-TV in Ägypten Wenn die TV-Moderatorin verschleiert bleibt, *Focus Online*, available on: <http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/krise-in-der-arabischen-welt/aegypten/tid-26634/aria-tv-in-aegypten-wenn-die-tv-moderatorin-unsichtbar-bleibt_aid_786033.html>.

¹⁰ Youtube, BBC Arabic news, (17 July 2012) 'Maria' Owat Qana Fada'iya Islamiya lil Monqbet, available on: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDWXHKLSsu8>>.

25 January revolution. While the launch of this channel represents one stream of Islamic thought in Egypt that was pre-existing and is not necessarily broadly accepted, it does serve to underline once more that Salafists have clearly become more visible and have been more publically assertive in expressing their beliefs and ideology and promoting their various visions of an Islamic society in Egypt. But even among the Salafist stream there is no complete ideological unity.

The Copts after Pope Shenouda

It is not only among the various Islamist streams that there have been developments. Under Mubarak, Pope Shenouda III, patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church and Egypt's largest Christian denomination,¹¹ maintained a close relationship with the government and often acted as the political representative of the Copts. Since the ouster of Mubarak the church leadership has made considerable effort to cultivate relations with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and even the Muslim Brotherhood, in a continuation of the old format of Church-state relations. When Pope Shenouda died on 17 March 2012 after a long illness and 40 years as Pope, this presented the church with the challenge of safeguarding the position of Copts in Egyptian society at a time when Islamists are asserting their political authority. The Coptic Pope plays a significant role, not only for Copts, but also in national politics, so the process of choosing a new pope is a sensitive one. As of the end of July 2012, the process has yet to be concluded.

The uprising has not left the political life of Copts untouched. While many Copts supported Pope Shenouda's leadership strategy, others had become disillusioned by the Church's clear support for Mubarak and the National Democratic Party. This disillusionment was manifested during the 2011 uprising and many Copts joined the protests against the advice of the Pope and other Church leaders. Consequently, the new patriarch will face a number of challenges from within the Coptic community. These will include managing rivalries within the Church leadership and maintaining the unity of the Coptic community despite growing disillusionment with the conservative agenda of the Church.¹² Also the management of Coptic fears of rising Islamism will be a significant challenge. The victory of Mohammed Morsi in the presidential election in June caused panicked reactions among some Copts but it is possible that these fears will cause a section of the community to unite still more closely behind Shenouda's eventual successor as they look for someone to safeguard their status in society.

Religion and the constitution

As Egypt's diverse range of religious identities and ideologies define their place in post-Mubarak Egyptian society, it is in the new constitution that the place of religion

¹¹ Egypt's Copts are thought to make up 10 to 12 per cent of the population but there are no reliable statistics. The Coptic Church often claims Copts are 20% of the population according to their internal figures.

¹² Monir, M. (3 April 2012) What it Means to be Coptic Patriarch Now, Fair Observer, available on: <<http://www.fairobserver.com/article/what-it-means-be-coptic-patriarch-now>>.

in the political system will be set out. Almost as soon as Mubarak stepped down, the debate over Article 2 of the constitution started because it is this article that states that Islam is the religion of the state and that Islamic Sharia principles are the main source of law. Even before the uprising, the debate over the appropriateness of this article would periodically take hold. According to some of Egypt's political and religious groups, such as al-Nour Party, Article 2 does not go far enough but should be changed to implement full Islamic law and not only its principles. For others, religion should not form a legal source at all. One potential compromise is to include a provision that makes al-Azhar, Egypt's moderate Islamic institution, the reference for interpreting the meaning of Sharia principles, in an effort to curtail the influence of more radical Islamists and soothing the fears of liberals and non-Muslims.

At present it seems that despite the long and heated debate, Article 2 could remain largely unchanged. There is a suggestion that either within Article 2, or in a separate article, that a clause should be incorporated that states Christians and Jews should be governed by laws according to their religions. While this appears to offer some kind of compromise to some of Egypt's non-Muslim communities, it serves to underline the principle that religion is a source of law and that Egyptians are treated differently before law on the basis of their religious affiliation. This also underscores still further the exclusion of followers of other faiths, such as the Bahais. Finally, it is of course unclear what 'Christian laws' for example actually means in reality.

Regardless of the outcome of the constitution drafting process, the dynamics of Muslim-Copt relations and how they are managed by the Church and state are part and parcel of Egypt's transition post-Mubarak because they underlie the discussions concerning Egypt's future as a civil state and how the concept of civil state is understood and implemented. This is related to the place of religion in the political system and also the demands for freedom and social justice that came out of the uprising. The treatment of Copts and other religious communities under a new government will be a key indicator of the maturity of Egypt's democratic transition.