

Symbolic systems, power and politics

Understanding the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood
as an Islamic socio-political actor

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Islam and Politics in a changing Middle East

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Abstract

Following the 2011 popular uprisings in Egypt that brought down the existing regime and precipitated a sudden opening up of the national political landscape, Islamic groups freed from the state's heavy-handed repression have imposed themselves as very prominent actors in national social and political transition and reform processes. Among these groups, the Muslim Brotherhood has proven particularly successful in early electoral cycles and has thereby gained unprecedented access into the spheres of state power.

At present it seems a recent history of mutual politicized fear and distrust between two essentialized entities, 'Islam' and the 'West', continues to shape the way each side views the other. The following paper seeks to move beyond superficial perceptions of Islamic movements and instead to develop a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood as an Islamic socio-political actor operating in, and shaped by, a very specific historical material context.

To do this, we first develop a basic theoretical framework that draws on the work of prominent sociologists (primarily Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu) to addresses issues of reciprocal causality between social actor's religious views, beliefs and practices (symbolic systems and imaginative structures) and the social and political structures in which they operate. Rather than uni-dimensional 'Islamic actors', we want to understand the Brotherhood as "signifying agents engaged in the social construction of meaning (...) to elicit collective action"¹ To do this we focus particularly on the Muslim Brotherhood's contemporary economic policies and program in order to show that, in their unconditional adoption of capitalism and free-markets, the MB's actions are profoundly different from those adopted by other more radical and revolutionary Islamic movements in recent history. We will suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood's form of Islamic economic policies may be seen as fulfilling specific social and political functions, and therefore best understood in light of the movement's position in Egypt's social structure: as a rising 'pious bourgeoisie', long excluded and marginalized by the previous regime but nonetheless seeking to claim its stake by working within the framework of the existing socio-political order. We conclude by suggesting that the strategies suitable to a rising bourgeoisie trying to accrue power may not be the most adapted in a country facing such urgent demands for profound socio-economic change from its vast lower classes, especially given a contested religious field where no group monopolizes the production and manipulation of 'religious capital'.

¹ Wiktorowicz, 2004: 15

I. Introduction

Since early 2011, a sequence of momentous and historical events has shaken the socio-political status quo of several Arab countries, and abruptly *eschewed in* profound changes in those countries' political landscapes and underlying power structures. In Egypt, social uprisings on an unprecedented scale swept the country and succeeded in bringing down a corrupt, increasingly repressive and elitist regime – thereby putting an end to more than half a century of authoritarian rule. As a result, by June 2012 the Egyptian people had participated in generally fairly-contested parliamentary and presidential elections, leading to the controversial emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – via its newly created political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) - as Egypt's most powerful political actor.

Today the Muslim Brotherhood has been projected into the spheres of state power, and as it increasingly takes over state institutions² the organization finds itself in a position to directly shape and influence the policies and strategies that will guide Egypt through a very crucial phase in its national history. Due to the mis-understandings, prejudices and sensitivities associated with the movement's at-times violent history and Islamic character (and the perceived interrelation between the two elements), the Brotherhood's pivotal role has generated as much fear and apprehension in the minds of some, as it has inspired hope and optimism to others.

The powerful symbolic of the Muslim Brotherhood's accession to power over the past two years must be read on (at least) two, distinct yet closely interconnected levels. Domestically, since its creation in 1928 the Egyptian MB has served as the main opposition front in domestic political struggles against an all-too-often repressive, extractive central state and increasingly culturally-detached wealthy national elites. At the same time, as one of the Arab world's oldest and most well-established contemporary Islamic movements, the Brotherhood has also been a very prominent actor in a broader, regional 'Islamic' resistance against the perceived threats of growing political, ideological and cultural domination by foreign powers and ideas. At this level, the Islamic worldview has often played a 'counter-hegemonic' role, as one of the most potent sources of dissent and mobilization against the intellectual and economic order that Western neo-imperialist nations, and wealthy elites around the globe, have managed to impose on the international system.³ As a result, rather than being appreciated as complex, diffuse and

² “In Egyptian political discussions it is common to hear talk of the “Brotherhoodization of the state,” a process by which movement members enter and perhaps even dominate official institutions that had previously been closed to Islamists.” Brown, 2013: 5

³ Evans, 2011: 1-2.

heterogeneous forces, Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood have all too often become essentialized and perceived as ‘objects of fear.’

Should an Islamic movement be, by nature, perceived as a threat to the current global liberal and capitalist order? The following essay will look critically at the Islamic elements of the Muslim Brotherhood’s identity as a movement. Our hope is that a more nuanced and contextualized view of the Brotherhood as a social and political actor will help to better understand its strategies and actions in Egypt’s on-going processes of social re-structuring, political transition and institutional reform.

In a first part, we will develop a basic theoretical framework that will serve to structure our analysis of the dynamics and causality that exist between religious ideologies and socio-political factors. From there, we will turn to an evaluation of the Muslim Brotherhood with a focus on its economic program and policies.⁴ Our argument will be that the Islamic values, attitudes and motives that drive the Muslim Brotherhood’s actions cannot be viewed as a fixed ‘Islamic’ dogma or an autonomous set of variables; rather, these causal factors need to be seen as closely tied to, and in constant interaction with, the economic and political material circumstances in which the Muslim Brotherhood operates. We will suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood’s economic policies may be closely related to the association’s position in Egypt’s social structure: as a rising ‘pious bourgeoisie’, long excluded and marginalized by the previous regime but nonetheless seeking to claim its stake by working within the framework of the existing socio-political order. In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood today should not be perceived as a ‘counter-hegemonic’ threat. Rather, the breadth and nuances of the Islamic corpus has allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to gradually adopt values and idioms that (at least from an economic perspective) are actually very closely aligned with the predominant global liberal and capitalist order.

II. Theoretical Framework

Any sociologist who wants to say anything at all about the nature of Islam must proceed with great caution – Bryan S. Turner

The objective of the following theoretical model will be to provide some structure to our study of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as an Islamic social and political actor. It seems that Islamic actors and movements are too often appraised principally on the basis of their religious values and beliefs. The

⁴ This focus appears justified by the critical role that social and economic grievances have played in driving social unrest in Egypt since early 2011. “Recent Gallup polls [show] that over 85 percent of Egyptians are concerned primarily with unemployment, inflation and security, and the majority render the ongoing political debates and struggles as irrelevant to their lives.” Adly, 2012

resulting tendency towards limited, monocausal and potentially biased explanations can only distort or obfuscate our understanding of the movements' nature and behavior.⁵ Our analysis will pay particular attention to the Islamic identity of the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to question how this spiritual attribute should be factored into our overall understanding of the Brotherhood as a social and political agent.

As a whole, our approach will be primarily concerned with the causal relationships that might exist between three variables: the beliefs, worldview and attitudes of socio-political actors; the social structures, and political and economic material circumstances in which they operate; and finally, the actions and strategies that they adopt. This axis of reflection – into the exact nature of the relationship between the three given variables - has long been a prominent source of research and debate in social sciences, particularly sociology and the sociology of religion.⁶ While the present model cannot presume to be fully informed by the wealth of existing research and depth of prior inquiry, we will draw from a variety of sources in order to design a simple, yet nuanced and flexible approach.⁷

Fundamental to our perspective will be the premise that the three variables – actors' and groups' beliefs and ideology, their actions and strategies, and the surrounding social structures and reality - are interdependent and defined by a relationship of reciprocal causation. Therefore:

- An actor's or groups' beliefs and worldview are influenced by the specific material context in which they are formed; meanwhile, these same beliefs and worldview also influence and structure the social order in which actors or groups evolve due to the influence of interpretive frames in the construction of social reality.
- Similarly, the material context in which an actor or a group evolve will be defined by structures of opportunities and constraints that are likely to influence their interests, strategies and actions; meanwhile, these same strategies and actions often have a direct influence over an actor's or a group's operating environment, either by causing re-structuring or by affecting the perception of opportunities or constraints.

⁵ Quintan Wiktorowicz warns that: "Islamic activism is not sui generis (...) [most publications] implicitly essentialize Islamic activism as unintelligible in comparative terms and perpetuate beliefs in Islamic exceptionalism." (2004: 3) Bryan Turner writes that: "For Weber, monocausal theories, whether material or spiritual, were foolish and unscientific." (1974, 10)

⁶ Turner, 1974: 7-21; Bourdieu, 1991

⁷ In light of the generally exclusive and limiting nature of individual theories, Bourdieu writes: "one must endeavor to situate oneself at the geometric vantage point in the various perspectives from which one can see, at the same time, both what can and cannot be seen from each of these separate points of view." (1991: 2)

- Also, the beliefs and attitudes held by an actor or a group will influence the actions they undertake and strategies they adopt (via motives⁸); meanwhile, the actions and strategies of an actor or a group have been found to have an influence over their beliefs and attitudes, over the way they view the world.

Given the scope of this essay, we will focus on the first two of the three relationships described above. Implicit in our premise of reciprocal causation is the view of religion as “a symbolic medium at once structured and structuring”⁹, and the idea that “a correspondence exists between social structures (strictly speaking, power structures) and mental structures.”¹⁰ Social scientists have long debated the existence, weight, and especially direction of causality between ideas/ ideology and actions/developments in material reality. While unrepresentative of each thinker’s position, the following example is illustrative: many have interpreted Karl Marx as being more inclined to seeing “Protestantism as the ideology of capitalism, the religious epiphenomenon of an economic phenomenon”, while Max Weber has been associated with a ‘causative theory of ideas’ which inverses the same relationship.¹¹

In fact, a closer look at Max Weber’s sociological approach to motives and religion can be very useful for the present exercise. Weber is known for having developed ‘interpretive sociology’, or a “special philosophy of social science and a related methodology which attempt to present the social actor’s constitution of social reality by subjective interpretations.”¹² Weber was therefore interested in the interpretive frames through which actors not only engage with the world around them, but also through which they actively constitute a subjective reality that is reflective of their views and beliefs. Here we find an illustration of the interplay between the three variables described above. On the one hand, Weber finds that “dogma (...) [can provide] a rigid, causally influential, framework within which social activity is carried out.”¹³ But at the same time, this ‘dogma’ is usually conditioned by external factors. The basic elements (values, beliefs) that shape the interpretive lens through which an actor views reality and therefore justifies his motives cannot simply be considered as objective, independently-given variables. For Weber, “the worldviews (and their attendant vocabularies of motive) which are influential in action [are] themselves shaped by the interests of social strata which became their historical carriers.”¹⁴ Therefore, the material context (social, political and economic conditions) influences the strategies of

⁸ The sociology of motives can be seen as studying “the possession by particular actors or groups of vocabularies, phrases or outlooks which, far from being rationalizations, or mystifications or interests, act as motive forces for action itself.” (Turner, 1974:19)

⁹ Bourdieu, 1991: 3

¹⁰ Bourdieu, 1991: 5

¹¹ H.R Trevor-Repor and Syed Hussein Alatas cited in Turner, 1974: 9

¹² Turner, 1974: 3

¹³ Turner, 1974: 13

¹⁴ Turner, 1974: 20

actors (as an individual or as a group) and creates motives for action; these motives are then incorporated into religious traditions (beliefs and practices), which then affect their carriers' worldviews (interpretive frame), and thereby justify actions and strategies that serve a specific social or political function.¹⁵

Building from works of earlier thinkers such as Durkheim and Weber, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides powerful insights into the social and political functions of religion. Bourdieu looks at the “system of production of religious ideology”¹⁶, the conditions and processes that shape the articulation and dissemination of “symbolic systems, language, religion, art and so forth” by specific actors that have a monopoly over the creation ‘religious capital’¹⁷. To a certain degree, parallels can be drawn with Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which sees social movements as “signifying agents engaged in the social construction of meaning (...) to elicit collective action.”¹⁸ While not strictly limited to the use of religious symbols and sacred imaginative constructs, the techniques identified by RMT appear to be similar. Social movements are still seen as relying on ‘framing processes’ through which “extant ideas and ideologies (...) are arranged and socially processed through grammatical constructs and interpretive lenses that create intersubjective meaning and facilitate movement of goods.”¹⁹

Bourdieu’s conclusion is similar to the one attributed to Weber above, that “religious interest is based on the need to legitimate the material or symbolic properties attached to a determinate type of conditions of existence and position in the social structure and, consequently, on this position.”²⁰ Moreover, he also makes another very important point concerning the functions fulfilled by religions. Observing the diversity of beliefs, values, and attitudes that have historically been drawn from each one of the major religious systems²¹, he notes that the breadth and versatility of its corpus can be a very important asset for a religion. In order to remain relevant and retain its “mystifying efficacy” through time and in different contexts, a religious system needs to maintain an appearance of unity and cohesion in message, while actually offering a wide margin of interpretation for the constitution of different doctrines (beliefs and practices) that can serve a variety of functions.²² This perspective is shared by Charles Tripp, who speaks of “a repertoire of Islamic terms, narratives and prescriptions familiar to many, but assembled in particular combinations according to a logic that is not exclusive to Muslims, let along an abstracted

¹⁵ Turner, 1974: 137

¹⁶ Bourdieu, 1991: 5

¹⁷ Bourdieu, 1991: 22

¹⁸ Wiktorowicz, 2004: 15

¹⁹ Wiktorowicz, 2004: 15

²⁰ Bourdieu, 1991: 17

²¹ Bourdieu, 1991: 18

²² Bourdieu, 1991: 19

‘Islam’ (...) [and is] also shaped by the economic and political structures in which they are engaging.”²³ Finally, Bjorn Utvik cites Ernest Gellner’s thesis about a tendency over time among Muslim reform movements to rely on a form of “‘High Islam’ [that] is a fairly flexible belief system with relatively simple ritual and doctrine, easily adaptable to changing circumstances of time and place.”²⁴

As a whole, this theoretical framework provides a number of assumptions that will guide us through the rest of our exercise. Observing that, over time, each major religion has served to convey and support very distinct messages, beliefs and practices²⁵, we find that this fluctuation may reflect the need to harness the religion’s symbolic power to fulfill social and political functions that change according to time and place. Therefore, we conclude that a social actor’s beliefs and worldview cannot be fully understood without also considering how these factors are influenced by the social, political and economic conditions in which they are developed, as well as by the strategies of the actor or group that carries them. It is important that the causal reciprocity on which our model is built means that beliefs and values are not neutral factors, and that they, in turn, also influence both the perception of reality and the constitution of strategies. In short, the objective is to avoid “the simplistic alternative (...) that is the opposition between the illusion of the absolute autonomy of mythical or religious discourse and the reductionist theory that makes it the direct reflection of social structures.”²⁶

Finally, while our simple analysis will look most to the effects “the macro-social changes in the cultural and economic conditions of societies”²⁷, it is also critical to mention the number of meso- and micro-level variables that can influence social actors. Recent research has increasingly stressed the importance of acknowledging the social networks in which decisions are made, actions are taken, and policies are developed – the influence of cross-cutting societal pressures, competition, coalitions, alliances. Steven Heydemman warns against “models [which] allocate interests to actors based on a rigid and narrow conception of the positions they occupy in an economy, and thus fail to take into account the socially-embedded, plural, and hybrid quality of interests, or what this means for the politics of economic policy-making and policy reform.”²⁸ All in all, one must strike a balance that allows for the flexibility and nuance of plural causality without falling into the blurriness of causal indeterminacy.²⁹

²³ Tripp, 2006: 1

²⁴ Utvik, 2006: 235

²⁵ Bourdieu, 1991: 18-19

²⁶ Bourdieu, 1991: 5

²⁷ Turner, 1974: 137

²⁸ Heydemann, 2004:

²⁹ Turner, 1974: 14

III. Islam and capitalism - A source of counter-hegemonic thought

In order to appreciate the full meaning and significance of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's contemporary economic policies and program, one must absolutely view them within the wider historical framework of the past two centuries.

Since the rise of European imperialist enterprises in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 19th century³⁰, the Islamic religion has consistently distinguished itself as a critical element in one of the defining cultural and civilizational struggles of recent history. Sometimes depicted as Islam against the West, or Islam against modernity³¹, this struggle has been portrayed as pitting an essentialized Islam (as religion, ideology, culture, ethos, and worldview) against the cognitive, political, and economic hegemonic forces of a distinctly Western, liberal, and capitalist world order. Faced with the creeping advances and powerful transformative potential of Western positivism and an alluring liberal capitalist ethos, Muslim intellectuals have sought to rely on Islam as a viable spiritual and philosophical alternative in their resistance to a process of global homogenization in values, ideas and imaginative structures.³²

One dimension of this Islamic resistance has focused particularly on capitalism. The social and economic logic accompanying the spread of capitalism has consistently been branded as a powerful and possibly existential threat to Arab and Islamic societies. In his book entitled *Islam and the moral economy: The challenge of capitalism*, Charles Tripp explains³³:

the values fostered by the material structures of capitalism (and by communism in a different context) were seen as antithetical to the values which defined the Islamic view of the life of man, relations between human beings and the place of mankind in history and in relation to the eternal. There was a question of identity at stake here, but it was not simply a question of identity. There was also a belief that to accept such values and the logic of their assumptions would be to negate the true order of things, as described and prescribed in the Islamic texts, thereby contradicting the way in which the social universe was created and blocking proper ethical development.

³⁰ Mitchell, Timothy. Introduction of *Rule of Experts – Egypt, Techno-Politics and Modernity*. Berkely: University of California Press, 2002.

³¹ Bjorn Utvik (2006: 3) defines modernity as:

1. Historic processes of technological and economic change underway in some areas of Europe since the 16th century and in the Middle East from the 19th, producing a society where market relations dominate production and exchange, where the cities contain the bulk of the population and where industry is the dominant branch of production;
2. The attendant processes of social and political change; on the social level the break-up of tightly-knit traditional units dominated by family and patron-client relations within urban quarters, villages, or kinship groups, on the political level the increased mobilisation of the population and the rapid growth and centralisation of the state apparatus.

³² Tripp, 2006

³³ Charles Tripp, 2006: 47

Radical or revolutionary intellectuals³⁴ - “who do not simply happen to be Muslim, but who see themselves as providing guidance and example to other Muslims”³⁵ - have sought to construct an anti-capitalist discourse by drawing on the ethical and egalitarian foundations of Islamic jurisprudence and symbolic corpus. The idea is that complete, systemic change is needed to work towards a holistic, integrated Islamic worldview that would ideally stand against a trend of “ethically neutral deterministic rationalism”³⁶ and prevent the “social disintegration encouraged by the apparently unrestrained acquisitiveness of an all-devouring capitalism.”³⁷

These attempts have been portrayed as counter-hegemonic to the extent that they represent a struggle for control over individual consciences. This struggle is against a cognitive and cultural hegemony - with hegemony understood as put forward by Antonio Gramsci, “a ‘disciplinary mode of social organization’ which functions largely without need of coercion and on a global scale (...) [it] imbues the individual with certain ways of thinking, thus instilling modes of social consciousness that make social action both predictable and in the service of particular interests.”³⁸ Today, the perceived hegemony is that of neo-liberalism, one supported by a powerful free-market, capitalist discipline consisting of “a set of normative relationships with global reach, supported by discourses of truth, and widely accepted as ‘common sense’.”³⁹

IV. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

After a brief note on the Brotherhood’s organizational structure to justify our focus on the movement’s leadership as the main policy-making body, we will look at the economic program put forward by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011-2012, and then finally try to contextualize this program by discussing the Brotherhood’s general position within the Egypt’s national socio-economic structure.

A. Our perspective on the Brotherhood

When trying to assess the Muslim Brotherhood’s stance towards post-Mubarak economic reform, there are several factors that support the idea that one can focus on the movement’s top echelons (i.e., the

³⁴ The terms ‘radical’ and ‘revolutionary’ are not used with negative connotation, but only to the extent that any ideology calling for a complete revision of the actual order and equilibrium is to be considered of radical or revolutionary nature.

³⁵ Tripp, 2006: 1

³⁶ Choudhury, 2000: 6.

³⁷ Tripp, 2006: 197

³⁸ Evans, 2011: 1754

³⁹ Evans, 2011: 1755

15-20 member Guidance Bureau) as the most influential faction determining the group's strategies, and therefore it's economic program. While the organization has been compared to "an organizational umbrella for different (...) Islamic trends"⁴⁰ from across the ideological spectrum, it has nonetheless often been described as very disciplined and hierarchical. One of the leading experts on the Muslim Brotherhood, Hossam Tamam, has compared the movement to a 'totalitarian entity'⁴¹, explaining that in recent years (especially since 2009), a conservative and "influential faction of its leadership is increasingly monopolising decisions on matters pertaining to the group's image, ideological orientation and future."⁴² The organization is therefore largely dominated by an older generation of hard-line conservatives (many reformist-minded elements were pushed out between 2009 and 2010)⁴³. The average age of the Guidance Bureau is 61 years old, and "MB youth are generally marginalized within both the Brotherhood and Freedom and Justice Party leadership structure."⁴⁴ The image of a tightly-controlled organization is supported by others, including suggestions that "the fear of repression [under Mubarak] has contributed to weakening the group's different institutions – namely, the Shura Council – and concentrating power in the hands of the few members of the Guidance Bureau."⁴⁵ Finally, an additional insight into the group's highly-regulated dynamics and structure is provided by a researcher who conducted an ethnographic study surveying Egyptian voters' perceptions during the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections in a village of Fayoum governorate. The researcher observed that:

From the work of the Ikhwani leaders in the village, the villagers noticed the strict hierarchy that informs the work of the Brotherhood members on the ground. In other words, the villagers understood the Brotherhood's adherence to the dictates of the Guidance Bureau, or the Murshid, as an orthodoxy that made the Brotherhood stricter than the Salafis.⁴⁶

In light of these characteristics of the Brotherhood's organizational structure, we will work from the assumption that the Brotherhood's strategies and actions as a political actor and potential agent of institutional reform can be fairly well understood by looking at the movement's leadership – which today consists mostly of the Guidance Bureau and the leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party.

B. The Brotherhood's 2011-2012 Economic program

By 2011, when the Brotherhood was finally able to compete in relatively free and fair elections via its new Freedom and Justice political party, it developed and ran on an economic program whose domestic

⁴⁰ Tamam, 2009 (A)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tamman, 2009 (B)

⁴⁴ RAND, 2012: 13-14

⁴⁵ El-Hennawy, 2011

⁴⁶ Ahmed, 2013

policies were unmistakably close to mainstream neo-liberal policies. The movement offered a comprehensive socio-economic development plan, el-Nahda (the Renaissance), the design of which was entrusted to Khairat el-Shater⁴⁷, a very successful and wealthy businessman who has also been one of the most influential actors within the Muslim Brotherhood in recent years (despite being held in prison by the Mubarak regime in the years leading up to 2011.)⁴⁸ “The fact that the Brotherhood selected el-Shater to head the Nahda program indicates that the market-oriented faction of the movement is exerting more influence on the movement’s economic agenda than the government-oriented faction.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the Brotherhood’s program called for a focus on privatization and the stimulation of growth via pro-business policies, and an emphasis on de-regulation and the liberation of market forces and competition as the best way to reduce government corruption and inefficiency. While these policies did imply a call for changes from the Mubarak regime via institutional reforms and structural transformations, they in no way challenged the underlying assumptions and mechanisms of the existing capitalist status quo.

On a rhetorical level, the movement has maintained the normative goal of an Islamic economy as an ethical endeavor seeking to achieve “complementarity between the social and economic ends.”⁵⁰ This approach has been compared to a form of:

‘Inclusive capitalism’ as a free enterprise economic system in which the benefits of economic growth and development are distributed among all citizens instead of being reserved for small political and business elite. They prescribe fair and free competition as the remedy that will distribute the benefits of growth in a more equitable manner.⁵¹

Of course, one would hope that the Muslim Brotherhood’s intentions are real, and that they will ensure that if they do manage to stimulate Egypt’s economy, then wealth will be redistributed justly in order to empower the millions of impoverished Egyptians⁵². However, unsubstantiated promises concerning the potential immediate gains from liberated markets and de-regulation need to be viewed with caution. For a recent example, one need only look back to the dramatic failures of the ‘Washington Consensus’ policies in the 1990’s. The Washington Consensus was a concerted effort (attributed to ‘neo-liberal’ actors) to impose free-market and liberalization policies in order to spur competition and growth. But this experience proved instead that “markets [are] politically constructed and maintained”⁵³ and that these

⁴⁷ Habibi, 2012: 5

⁴⁸ Tamam, 2009 (B)

⁴⁹ Habibi, 2012: 5

⁵⁰ Choudhury, 2000 : 5

⁵¹ Habibi, 2012: 5

⁵² For a very clear, optimistic articulation of these charitable intentions, see an article focused on wealthy MB leaders Hassan el-Malek and (to a lesser extent) Khairat el-Shater, published in the American magazine Bloomberg Newsweek: “The Economic Vision of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Millionaires”, Suzy Hansen, 09/04/2012

⁵³ Heydemann, 2004: 18

policies were very vulnerable to manipulation by rent-seeking ‘networks of privilege’, to reinforce positions of power or create new patronage networks⁵⁴. While in each case the underlying faith in the potential and power of markets is supported by a different ideology (the neutrality of free competition vs. the inherent moral qualities of Muslims), the end results are likely to be the same - and in light of the lessons learned from the ‘Washington Consensus’, it would be foolish not to exercise caution in the face of the Brotherhood’s avid support for free-market capitalism.⁵⁵

C. Socio-economic context – the Brotherhood as a rising elite and middle class

Egypt’s history over the past half century has been highly affected by a number of Islamic movements that “have sought to project Islam as a revolutionary vehicle” by relying on the claim that “‘change had to be total, comprehensive, and revolutionary’ because they saw ‘no possibility of coexistence between Islam and other political and social systems.’”⁵⁶ Throughout the Brotherhood’s early decades (1928-1970’s), these radical tendencies and smaller revolutionary movements were often closely tied, formally or informally, to the Muslim Brotherhood. This connection occurred most famously through Sayyid Qutb, whose writings and stirring revolutionary persona became hugely inspirational to young radical Islamists, especially following his execution under Nasser in 1966. However, by the 1970’s the Muslim Brotherhood, under the leadership of then Supreme Guide ‘Umar al-Timisani, had distanced itself from these radical trends in favor of a more moderate line⁵⁷ and a politically ‘accommodationist’⁵⁸ stance.

The high prevalence of social justice and social solidarity in Islamic discourses has often generated the impression of Islamic movements fighting for the sake of the poor and the lower classes. However, many have challenged this impression, explaining instead that “the Muslim Brotherhood is more of a middle-class project that has been always distant from the poor and marginalized classes.”⁵⁹ Indeed, there are many indications that, throughout the past decades, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood has

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion on this topic see Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege: Rethinking the Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East* and John Sfakianakis, *The Whales of the Nile: Networks, Businessmen, and Bureaucrats during the era of privatization in Egypt* in Heydemann, 2004.

⁵⁵ Charles Tripp (2009) warns: “The same searching questions should be asked of the religiously motivated that are asked of liberals, conservatives, Marxists, fascists, nationalists, and any other group that tries to put into practice its imagined notion of the good life. One should not rely only on the players’ descriptions of themselves. Yet this is precisely what has happened to the effort to understand the role of religion in shaping the political lives of Muslims. Many members of the Western media, and even many Western academics, have pointed to the most extreme of Muslim political tracts and suggested that these are what Islamism, or even Islam, is really about.”

⁵⁶ Evans, 2011: 1757

⁵⁷ Utvik, 2006: 61

⁵⁸ Abed-Kotob, 1995

⁵⁹ El-Hennawy, 2012

become increasingly wealthy, while the movement's constituency as whole has increasingly come to represent a well-educated, middle class segment of the population.

The 1970's and 1980's have been viewed as a period of growing prosperity for some members of the Muslim Brotherhood, as changing economic policies (privatization and liberalization initiated under President Sadat and accelerated under Mubarak) and increasingly close ties with the Gulf region allowed many to become very successful businessmen. Bjorn Utvik notes that "during 'Umar al-Tilmisani's time as the Supreme Guide [1972-1986], the dominant faction to emerge within the Muslim Brothers was that which Springborg labels 'the Islamic wing of the *infatih* bourgeoisie'."⁶⁰ This trend continued into the 1990's and early 2000's, as the following two Supreme Guides (Abu al-Nasr from 1986-1995 and Mustafa Mashhur from 1995-2002) were closely involved with this particular faction of wealthy, connected and successful Brothers. Hossam Tamam observes: "Unlike MB investment under Hassan al-Banna, which was part of a national liberation quest (...) investment in the liberalization period took on a consumerist nature. As of the 1990's, the largest MB investments were directed at luxury housing and North Coast tourist resorts."⁶¹

However despite this commercial and financial success, relations with the state and ruling elites continued to be tense and at times outright hostile. It seems that the Muslim Brotherhood (mostly its leadership, but also its broader membership) were on ambiguous terms with the existing order under the Mubarak regime – at once profiting from growing material comfort and increasingly integrated into the system, but also constantly kept at a distance, excluded, and alienated from "Westernized indigenous elements monopolizing positions of power."⁶² The state often took deliberate action to suppress or weaken prominent elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, through economic pressures or even the direct imprisonment of numerous MB members.⁶³ In 2009, Hossam Tamam noted that "most of the economic institutions that have been subject to security and legal action of late are owned by MB members, some of who have leading posts within the group, such as El-Shater, Hassan Malek, Sanaa Youssef Nada and Ghaleb Hemmat."⁶⁴

At the conclusion of a study on the nature of the social ties that define Islamic movements in Egypt, Janine Clark finds that these movements are much more reliant on horizontal ties via homogenous associational networks, and therefore can be understood as attempts by "upwardly mobile, educated, middle-class professionals: the new middle class"⁶⁵ to access resources and find ways to compensate for

⁶⁰ Utvik, 2006: 62

⁶¹ Tamam, 2009 (B)

⁶² Utvik, 2006: 253

⁶³ Tamam, 2005

⁶⁴ Tamam, 2009 (B)

⁶⁵ Clark, 2004: 947

an absence of state services and support structures. Clark sees Islamists as representing “the hopes of an emergent professional class for political power.”⁶⁶ In his study of Egyptian Islamists in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Bjorn Utvik also came to the conclusion that “Islamism, rather than being a ‘movement of the disinherited’, most centrally expresses the growing assertiveness of an aspiring alternative elite of upwardly mobile educated groups originating from the lower middle classes and raised in a religious environment.”⁶⁷ Looking specifically at the Muslim Brotherhood in 2005, Hossam Tamam indicated that as it had increased its engagement in politics, the group had “lost its revolutionary zeal, offering programs that [were] not radically different from those of other opposition groups.”⁶⁸

Therefore, upon taking a closer look at the Muslim Brotherhood we find that throughout the last decades of the 20th century and up to the 2011 revolution, the movement had gain considerable advantages from adopting new strategies. These strategies included a moderate and less confrontational socio-political stance, and building ties with some elements of the existing state system under Mubarak. However, the Brotherhood continued to be actively repressed, excluded and in a way culturally alienated from the ruling elites. This position in the country’s social and political structure, one combining aspiration to political-economic power with state exclusion and marginalization, helps to understand (but does not necessarily completely explain) the movement’s dedication to free enterprise, competitive markets, fighting corruption and limiting state power over the economy.

Conclusion

At a moment when, for the first time in its history, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood stands in a position to exercise political power directly through state institutions, our analysis has sought to better understand the movement – as a socio-political actor embedded in a specific historical and material context, and not simply as an essentialized ‘Islamic’ movement.

Our approach has been based on a theoretical framework concerned with the reciprocal causality between the beliefs and worldviews (symbolic systems and imaginative structures values) of religious actors, and the social structures and political-economic contexts in which they operate. From this perspective, we have found that the Muslim Brotherhood’s current economic policies and program can be seen as closely compatible with their general position within Egypt’s macro-level socio-political structures. While the movement presents its pro-market, pro-capitalist economic platform as a vehicle of Islamic values and principles in line with the religion’s unique ethos, a cursory look back to the recent

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Utvik, 2006: 40

⁶⁸ Tamam, 2005

history of Islamic thought has shown us that the Islamic corpus has also served to support movements and intellectual currents with radically anti-capitalist, 'counter-hegemonic' objectives. In light of these observations, our contention is that, at some level, the Muslim Brotherhood has become the carrier of a particular form of Islamic doctrine that serves a particular social and political function. As a result, (regardless of whether or not this process has occurred through an intentional process of framing or the conscious manipulation of symbols) we believe that the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic movements more generally, can only be fully understood through an in-depth study of both their religious beliefs and practices as well as their particular operating environment.

Of course, understanding an actor such as the Muslim Brotherhood also requires many more levels of analysis. If sociological evaluation and political analysis are already by nature very delicate exercises, this specific topic requires particular caution. Over the two years since the fall of Mubarak, realities on the ground in Egypt have been very fluid and dynamic, changing in rapid and often unpredictable ways. From social movements to public institutions, most social spheres in Egypt have undergone deep transformations - including evolving organizational structures, shifting power balances, the creation of new and sometimes rapidly influential actors, and unexpected splits or re-alignments in coalitions, alliances and interest groups.⁶⁹ In this context, so far the Muslim Brotherhood has been far more concerned with political struggles than with addressing the country's urgent socio-economic issues.⁷⁰ Upon closer attention, one finds that even if they are compatible with some of the movement's socio-political goals, the Brotherhood's beliefs and values and the resulting socio-economic policies – as focused as they are on maintaining claiming more power within the existing status quo - may not be the ideal approach to the current national challenges, with millions of poor and recently empowered Egyptians avid for deep structural transformations. In the cautionary words of a recent commentator: "Upholding the same averse position on social protests, neglecting economic rights, and pursuing neo-liberal policies may be politically costly for a government presiding over a large and disenchanting poor population."⁷¹

Given that the Muslim Brotherhood faces very active and effective competition from other actors within the religious field (primarily Salafi groups, which have also been very successful in electoral politics), the movement will have to either show more responsiveness to democratic pressures and demands, or increasingly rely on the same repressive and authoritarian methods as the regime against which it fought for decades.

⁶⁹ Brown, 2013: 1

⁷⁰ Brown, 2013 ; Adly, 2012

⁷¹ El-Hennawy, 2012

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