

UWTSD

Muslim Politics (HPRS7017)

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2. The role of the Muslim Brotherhood in developing ideas of ‘reform.’

Introduction

Islah is the Arabic word for “reform” and is usually used to describe Islamic reform movements from the eighteenth century to the current period.”¹ The need for reform stems from the concern of Islamists that the message and teachings of the Qur’an must continue to be perpetuated in its original and purest form in Islamic society and to eradicate any form of innovation” (*bid’a*) of non-Islamic origin which corrupts.² Islamic reform is comprehensive and all-encompassing as it covers every aspect of society including a reform of the economic, political, and educational systems and also seeks to uplift the status of women.³ The Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin), founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna is one such Islamic reform movement in in the twentieth century. This paper seeks to show how the Muslim Brotherhood contributed to Islamic reform with regards to Muslim politics since its inception and spread its reform ideals to the Arab region and even to North Africa with the establishment of Muslim Brotherhood chapters in Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Sudan.

Muslim Brotherhood From The 1920s to 1940s: “Vision of Islam as *din wa dawla*”

Riding on the ideas of Muhammad Abduh, a twentieth century modernist Islamic thinker who emphasised on a “national renaissance based on a return to the Islam of the first Muslims (the *Aslaf*, or pious ancestors),” the Muslim Brotherhood advocated a “vision of Islam as *din wa dawla* (religion and state)” based purely on the Shari’a.⁴ According to Wickham, this vision of Islam as religion and state became a distinctive

¹ John L. Esposito, ‘Islah’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 143.

² Esposito, p. 143, Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence Of Islam: Classical Traditions In Contemporary Perspective*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p, 174.

³ Esposito, p. 143.

⁴ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution Of An Islamist Movement*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.23, Mariz Tadros and Akram Habib, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt Democracy Redefined or Confined?* Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series, 25. (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), p. 49.

mark of Sunni revivalist groups in the Middle East region.⁵ In analyzing the deep-seated economic, political and societal problems plaguing Egypt in the 1920s, Al-Banna was of the opinion that these problems arose fundamentally due to Egypt deviating from its Islamic roots.⁶ Coupled with foreign interference and influence and the influx of Western values and practices, Egyptian society was seen to be in a decadent state. Al-Banna advocated that Islam provided a comprehensive solution and operating framework to fix the widespread problems in the nation and eradicate Western influence.⁷ *Ijtihad* (exercise of human reason) was to be applied when constructing laws from the Shari'a to meet the needs of the Muslim community in current times.⁸ The Shari'a must be the source of the constitution and laws in Islamic society.

However, instead of entering the political fray in the 1920s and advocating change by participating in politics, al-Banna emphasised that the Muslim Brotherhood would lead the Islamic reform from bottoms up.⁹ Thus, for the first twenty years of its founding, the Muslim Brotherhood penetrated the grassroots and build a strong base of followers through its network of social service and community projects through the mosques, schools, universities, professional syndicates and unions and educating its members through its intensive Islamic teachings.¹⁰ All its members were to be involved in religious outreach (*da'wa*) to the community around them and expand its base. Al-Banna believed that for a society to be transformed truly into an Islamic society and to desire an Islamic government on its own accord, it has to first begin with social reform of the heart and mind of the Muslims at the grassroots level before attempting to change the political system.¹¹ Thus, gradual reform and not revolution was at the heart of the Muslim Brotherhood's early organizational goals as it seeks for an Islamic state to be established in Egypt.¹²

⁵ Wickham, p.23.

⁶ Wickham, pp. 22-23

⁷ Reynolds, p. 179.

⁸ Wickham, p. 24.

⁹ Khalil Al-Anani, 'Upended Path: The Rise and Fall Of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood,' *The Middle East Journal*, 69.4 (2015), 527–543 (p.534).

¹⁰ Wickham, p.23.; Al-Anani, p.529; Tadros and Habib, p. 5.

¹¹ Ahmed Zaghloul Shalata, 'Islamists In Power: The Experience Of The Muslim Brotherhood In Egypt,' *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 11.1-2 (2018), 111–126. (p.114); Wickham, p. 23.

¹² Al-Anani, p.534.

Yet by the early 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood begin to make its foray into politics by fielding al-Banna and sixteen other candidates for the 1942 Egyptian parliamentary election but were defeated thoroughly “amid allegations of electoral fraud.”¹³ The 1940s also saw the spread of al-Banna and his reform ideas to countries in the Arab region like Jordan and Palestine, and Sudan in North Africa.¹⁴ Brotherhood branches were set up in these countries and they also took on social reforms and subsequently also engaged in elections to bring about reform via the political system.¹⁵

Muslim Brotherhood From The 1940s to 1970s: “*Jihad* as Religious Obligation of Every Muslim”

In the late 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood under the leadership of al-Banna acted on the Islamic concept of jihad (struggle) which is the religious obligation of every Muslim when they faced threats from non-Muslim to their existence as a community. Military units of the Muslim Brotherhood were activated to fight in the Palestine War in April 1948 after “the United Nations approved the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine in November 1947.” A series of violent events led to the assassination of then Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Banna by the government agents in 1949.

The 1950s to the 1970s saw a harsh crackdown on the Brotherhood and intense persecution by the regime under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹⁶ This led to the rise of radicalisation of ideas among members of the Brotherhood under the leadership of a “Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb” who advocated that armed revolution in Islam was legitimate against a government that was corrupt and has become ignorant (*jahili*) again.¹⁷ However, the mainstream conservative Brotherhood leadership refuted Qutb’s ideology and continued to emphasize al-Banna’s “gradualist approach to Islamic reform.”¹⁸

¹³ Wickham, p. 25.

¹⁴ Esposito, p. 218.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁶ Wickham, p. 28.

¹⁷ Wickham, p. 28., Reynolds, p. 180.

¹⁸ Wickham, p.29.

Muslim Brotherhood From The 1980s to 1990s: “Islam Is The Solution”

Throughout the 1980s to the 1990s, while al-Tilmisani, the third Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood carried on with “the gradualist approach to the Islamic reform of society and state,” he also advocated that the organization should be responsible to seize the opportunities that Allah has given to them to participate in politics.¹⁹ Thus, this period saw the Brotherhood joining the parliamentary elections and campaigning actively with the slogan, “Islam is the Solution.”²⁰ Thus, there was a more definite shift towards members of the Muslim Brotherhood participating in politics under al-Tilmisani’s leadership from the 1980s onwards and presenting Islam as the solution to the socio-economic and religio-political problems that Egypt faced.

1990s to 2000s: “A Civil State With An Islamic Reference”

One significant shift in reform ideals in the Brotherhood in the 1990s was the change from an emphasis on the establishment of an Islamic state in Egypt to “a civil state with an Islamic reference.”²¹ This shift can be attributed to the growing political discourse on “civil state” taking place in the Egyptian society in the 1990s. Increasingly, there was also a growing suspicion and attacks from the secularists on the Islamic movement as having an agenda to establish a “repressive theocratic state.”²² Sheikh Youssef El Qaradawy, an intellectual leader of the Brotherhood was most influential in leading this reform of “the Islamists not wanting a religious state but a civil state with an Islamic reference.”²³ Qaradawy emphasized that in a civil state with an Islamic reference, “people have a right to choose their ruler, they have the right to hold him accountable if he deviates from the application of God’s laws and they have the right to advise him.”²⁴ One could say that it was a good strategic change in the framing of their reform ideals from one that is pressing for an Islamic state to a civil state with a reference to Islamic law. In this way, the Muslim Brotherhood hoped to gain political legitimacy and more support from the masses. This new framework was incorporated in a draft party platform in 2007 and subsequently formalised with the launch of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in 2011.²⁵ The Brotherhood’s role in

¹⁹ Wickham, p. 30, 47.

²⁰ Reynolds, p. 179; Wickham, p. 47.

²¹ Tadros and Habib, p. 50.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

overthrowing President Hosni Mubarak's regime in early 2011 during the 'Arab Spring' led to the surprise and quick ascension of FJP to political power.²⁶ However, as quickly as the FJP came into power after they won the election in June 2012, so was their political demise which came a year later when the military launched a coup against the government.²⁷

Conclusion

At its inception, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt "was just one of several religious societies seeking to reinforce popular adherence to Islam and combat the threat posed by the spread of Western cultural values and lifestyles in a context of rapid social and political change."²⁸ However, by the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood has greatly expanded its base in Egypt and emerged as one of the most influential reform organizations in Egypt, growing from "three hundred to six hundred thousand members" since its beginnings.²⁹ Not only did its reform ideals captivate the hearts of the Muslims in Egypt, it spread beyond the shores of Egypt to Jordan, Palestine, Syria and even Sudan.³⁰ However, their political misstep of misreading the reality of the political situation in Egypt in the post 'Arab Spring' period and its inability to handle state affairs in the post-Mubarak era left the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in disarray. From being known as a moderate Islamic organization advocating for gradual reform, they became labelled as a terrorist organization by the government in December 2013 after being ousted from power by the military.³¹ Till this day, the Brotherhood never quite recover its influence and public support till this day.³² It remains to be seen if the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to re-organize itself and regain its widespread support from the masses and continue with its founding father's reform ideals or disappear into obscurity under heavy state persecution.

(Word Count: 1540)

²⁶ Al-Anani, p.527`.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

²⁸ Wickham, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁰ Esposito, pp. 217-218.; Wickham, p. 20.

³¹ Al-Anani, pp. 541-542.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 542-543.

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