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Islamist Political Thought in Egypt: al-Banna to Faraj

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The following is a short essay I wrote for an undergraduate college class on the history of Islamist political thought:

On June 30th, 2012, Mohammed Mursi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, assumed office as the 5th president of Egypt. In modern politics, the Muslim Brotherhood holds the highest offices of power in the state, but it began as a small movement in the port city of Suez with a membership of seven. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood expresses the culmination of decades of Islamist thought and is a diverse movement with members who champion women's rights and push for greater integration with Christians and other minorities, as well as more conservative, Salafist and Qutbist members.[\[i\]](#)

The shape and expression of Islamist thought has changed dramatically over the years, but the ideology expressed in the Muslim Brotherhood today has its foundation in the political writings of Hasan al-Banna, the man who founded the organization. From an early age, Hasan al-Banna took a strident stance against the British presence in Egypt, Christian missionary activity, and behavior that was deemed un-Islamic. Rather than pursue religious studies, al-Banna became a teacher and was posted at a school in the Suez Canal Zone, where he was appalled by what he saw as the dominance of materialism, secularism, and a trading of Islamic morals for Western decadence. He was also repulsed by the sight of Egyptians being exploited for the economic benefit of foreign powers.[ii]

The problems Egyptian society faced in confronting Westernization and colonial exploitation weighed heavy on Hasan al-Banna's mind and the only solution he felt was appropriate was a return to Islam. In a letter al-Banna sent to heads of state and other influential people, he said, in regards to Islam: "If we take the nation along this path, we shall be able to obtain many benefits ... For then we will construct our lives on our own principles and fundamental assumptions, taking nothing from others. Herein lie the highest ideals of social and existential independence, after political independence." [iii] From this, we can see that al-Banna rejected Westernization as a system of living, opting instead for Islam as a native, natural, superior and complete way of life.[iv]

Al-Banna left it to other thinkers to flesh out his ideas and

focused instead on social welfare programs and expanding the Brotherhood's membership. However, al-Banna did firmly establish the concept of a dichotomy of Islam versus the "West," attributing the decline of Muslim civilization to the wholesale adoption of Western values and social norms, and argued for a return to Islamic values as a solution to the social malaise being experienced in Egypt. He presented Islam as an opportunity for Egyptians to throw off the shackles of second-class humanity and reclaim their former glory, the former glory of their Islamic heritage. He also established the important concept of modernity and Islam not being mutually exclusive. A civilization does not have to be "Westernized," or secularized, in order to be modern. A civilization can be Islamic and modern as well: technologically advanced, socially progressive, but still retaining the values, beliefs, and social norms that make Muslims and Islamic civilization distinct.

While some of al-Banna's writing emphasizes the rejection of pacific forms of jihad in favor of armed conflict with unbelievers, al-Banna was pragmatic, conciliatory and willing to compromise. For example, while he disapproved of the Egyptian political system, he participated in elections.^[v] Other Islamists that followed al-Banna were less forgiving. For example, Sayyid Qutb was decidedly more in favor of violent jihad, earning himself the nickname "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror."^[vi]

Sayyid Qutb was born in Upper Egypt in 1906 and, like al-Banna, began his career as a teacher. He also adhered to al-Banna's ideology of Islam being the correct path for Egyptians to follow in

order to regain their power as a civilization and joined the Muslim Brotherhood. Where Qutb differed was in his stridency and his message of Islam being the only correct lifestyle in any part of the world where Muslims live. He was firmly against any system that gave legislative authority to man and, unlike al-Banna, did not compromise in his ideology. He wrote that “submission to God alone is a universal message which all mankind must either accept or be at peace with. It [a legal framework] must not place any impediment to this message, in the form of a political system or material power.” [vii]

He also believed that establishing this legal framework required more than “verbal advocacy of Islam,” because “the problem is that the people in power who have usurped God’s authority on earth will not relinquish their power at the mere explanation and advocacy of the true faith.” [viii] Qutb did not believe in idly sitting by and hoping that Islam would become dominant in the world of its own accord. He believed that Muslims have an obligation to actualize proper Islamic governance through action. He wrote, “...knowledge is for action... the Qur’an was not revealed to be a book of intellectual enjoyment, or a book of literature or art, fables or history... Rather, it was revealed to be a way of life, a pure mode of being from Allah.” [ix] Combined with Qutb’s idea of a single, true version of Islam, this concept of bringing about God’s law on earth through action contributed to the rise of violent jihad.

Building on Sayyid Qutb’s ideology, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj advocated the jihad of the sword as the only legitimate

interpretation of jihad, dismissing the greater jihad of internal struggle against sin as a fabrication meant to pacify the Muslim masses.[x] Like Qutb, Faraj saw (Western) modernity as a condition of moral bankruptcy, and as an infection that was destroying the ummah from within.[xi] In 1981, using his reworked definition of jihad, Faraj published a collection of justifications for violent jihad against un-Islamic rulers in a pamphlet called *al-Farida al-Gha'iba* (The Absent Duty). A few months later, the militant group that Faraj belonged to, Jama'at al-Jihad, planned and executed an assassination of President Anwar Sadat, a secular leader intent on rapid modernization.

The debate over Islam and how it relates to government in Egypt continued into the 1990s, with two opposing views being presented by Yusuf al-Qaradawi in *Min fiqh al-dawla fi'l-Islam* and 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman in *The Present Rulers and Islam: Are They Muslim or Not?* Qaradawi argued that democracy is compatible with Islam and wrote that "A call for democracy does not necessitate a rejection of God's sovereignty over human beings." [xii] He explains that Islam contains elements of democracy and uses role of an imam as an example. He says that an undesirable prayer leader may be removed, which is a precedent for the removing of an undesirable governmental leader, which in turn is an expression of democracy. The people select who will rule over them. Qaradawi argues that democracy is the best form of government for Muslims and it shouldn't be rejected simply because it originated outside of Islam. It should be incorporated, with useful elements being retained and the rest being discarded.[xiii]

‘Abd al-Rahman, on the other hand, advocated the rejection of any ruler that was not in full compliance with the concept of Islamic governance as expressed by Sayyid Qutb, even to the point of causing civil war. He wrote that *fitna* (civil war), though a serious issue in the Muslim ummah, is preferable to being ruled by an un-Islamic ruler, and that “We would not, in fact, consider the resulting social discord [from eliminating an un-Islamic ruler] to be *fitna* at all; rather we would regard it as a struggle for reform because its ultimate aim would be the elevation of the Truth, the uprooting of corruption, and the reaffirmation of Islam.” [xiv] For al-Rahman, whether or not to use violence is not a question, but rather a necessity, against any form of rule that is not compliant with the shariah and places legislative authority in the hands of man. The removal of the leader should be immediate, or the people will be just as guilty of *shirk* as the leader.

Islamist thought in Egypt has branched out into a number of different schools of thought, from extremists who advocate violent jihad and a return to the fundamentals to those who try to reconcile Islam with democracy. The common thread that holds them all together is their belief that the future lies in the Quran and man’s obedience to Islam and God’s law as a way to reestablish the power and dignity of Muslims. With the recent political upheaval in Egypt and the coming to power of a Muslim Brotherhood member, Islamists may finally have the opportunity to realize some of their ideals. Mohammed Mursi’s ascension to Egypt’s presidency is a remarkable event and Hasan al-Banna’s surviving brother, Gamal al-Banna, believes the election would

have pleased his brother, because “it was God’s will.” [xv]

[i]. “How Muslim Brotherhood went from 7 members to Egypt’s presidency,” June 29, 2012,

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/06/29/154443/how-muslim-brotherhood-went-from.html>.

[ii]. Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50.

[iii]. Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 58.

[iv]. Ibid.

[v]. Ibid., 52-53.

[vi]. Ibid., 129.

[vii]. Ibid., 146.

[viii]. Ibid., 147.

[ix]. Ibid., 141.

[x]. Ibid., 323.

[xi]. Ibid., 322.

[xii]. Ibid., 238.

[xiii]. Ibid., 230–245.

[xiv]. Ibid., 350.

[xv]. “How Muslim Brotherhood went from 7 members to Egypt’s presidency.”

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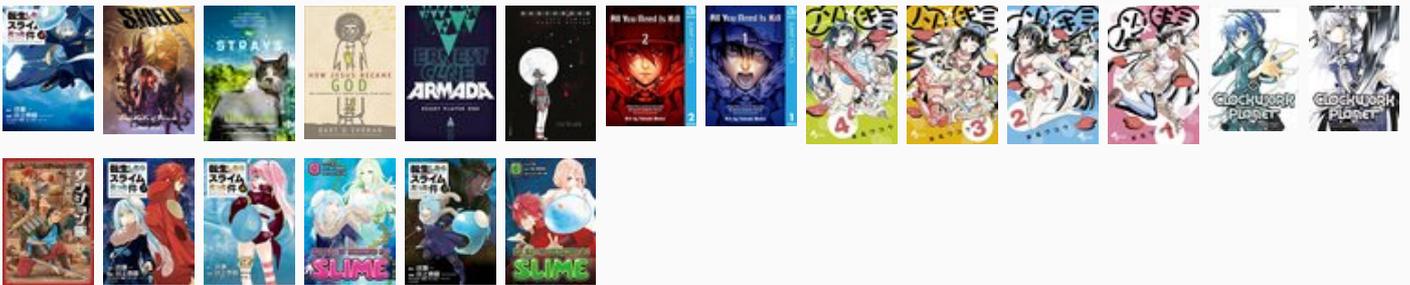
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