Between Idealism & Political Pragmatism: What Does the Ascendancy of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Mean for the Future?

John Calvert
Introduction

The Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies was established in 2012. The first institution of its kind in Colorado, the Center is dedicated to promoting and strengthening the study and understanding of the societies, political systems, and international relations of the Middle East and the broader Islamic world. The Center seeks to generate scholarly research and foster public understanding of this critical and changing part of the world. Engaging in both academic and policy research based on an interdisciplinary social science agenda, the Center will produce new scholarship on the Middle East and provide a lively forum for dialogue and debate on the contemporary politics of the region. A specific focus of the Center’s work is the relationship between Muslim societies and democracy.

With this in mind we are proud to publish our first occasional paper, an examination of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood by the eminent historian John Calvert. The timing of this publication could not be better, given the dramatic political transformations in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring. For a Western audience, one of the most puzzling developments of the Arab Spring has been the rise to prominence and political power of religious-based movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

It is often said that Egypt is the most important country in the Arab-Islamic world, given its size, its history and that the fact that political developments in Egypt reverberate throughout the entire region. When Egypt shakes, the saying goes, the rest of the Middle East feels the tremors. In the aftermath of Egypt’s first democratic presidential elections, which brought a senior of member of the Muslim Brotherhood to power, understanding this political movement has never been more important for the United States and the rest of the world.

Few scholars are better positioned to explore this topic than John Calvert of Creighton University, whose magisterial study Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism (2010) is “the standard intellectual biography of the most influential Muslim
thinker of the twentieth century,” in the words of Professor Joel Gordon of the University of Arkansas. The book offers what Professor Thomas Hegghammer of Harvard University called “crucial new insights on the post-1954 history of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.”

We were honored to host Professor Calvert at the Center for Middle East Studies on October 24 for a stimulating lecture in front of a packed hall, followed by a spirited discussion. This Occasional Paper grew out of that lecture, but has been updated in response to the dramatic unfolding of events in Egypt since. The paper provides an illuminating historical context in which to understand the evolution, agenda and trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood within the framework of a changing Egypt.

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One of the major consequences of the Arab Spring has been the rise to political prominence of Islamist groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Many observers were taken by surprise at the gains made by the Brotherhood in Egypt’s parliamentary and then presidential elections. They should not have been. The Muslim Brotherhood established deep roots in civil society over the past four decades. Building upon its presence in the syndicates and social service and educational sectors, it took advantage of the networks of support gained in previous political campaigns to easily dominate the political space created by President Hosni Mubarak’s ouster. Certainly no other political party or trend that emerged from Tahrir Square possessed comparable measures of political capital and moxie.

But what does the Islamist ascendency in Egypt presage for the future? Some observers, both within and without Egypt, see a looming disaster. They believe the Muslim Brotherhood has a hidden agenda, one built on a desire for theocracy that will stymie the promise of universal human rights—particularly in the realms of gender
relations and religious minority rights—and stunt the development of democracy. These
 critics argue further that the Muslim Brotherhood is a facilitator, or at the very least an
 incubator of politically motivated violence. They say it is no accident that many jihadis
 are affiliated either directly or indirectly with the Muslim Brotherhood; that in fact, the
 Mubarak regime did the world a favor by curtailing Brotherhood activities to the extent
 that it did. According to the skeptics, even if the Muslim Brotherhood does abandon its
 conspiratorial ways and outmoded thinking, its deeply entrenched political paternalism
 will ensure the continuation of authoritarianism in Egypt in a religious guise.

 But others are more at ease with current Muslim Brotherhood activity, and are
 guardedly optimistic about the movement’s future course. These observers say that if the
 Brotherhood has a record of violence, that violence was circumstantial, a consequence of
 the blockages that the regime placed in the movement’s way, or else the result of the
 state’s savage persecution and torture of its cadre. In other words, state repression has
 been the cause of Islamist militancy rather than its result. Representatives of this position
 say that now that the road is open, we can expect the Muslim Brotherhood to operate as
 any normal political organization would, as a legitimate player in the country’s life, one
 that has a conservative cultural agenda but is not extreme in its theory or in its practice.
 In fact, these commentators claim, the tight control exerted by the Brotherhood over its
 members ensures that troublemakers within the movement are, and will continue to be,
 reined in.

 As with any conundrum, there is a modicum of
 truth in each of these positions. On the one hand, the
 Muslim Brotherhood is not simply the manifestation of
 an immutable, animating idea that propels adherents
to believe and act in a certain ways. Rather, it is a
 social movement—one that springs from, and
 responds to, tensions in Egypt’s social, economic, and
 political environments; organizes and mobilizes

The Muslim Brotherhood is not simply the manifestation of an immutable, animating idea but a social movement. Since its foundation in 1928, it has been guided by realism and open to change within the framework of its ideology.
supporters; is flexible in adapting to changing circumstances; and frames its activities in culturally appropriate ways—in this case, in terms of symbols, doctrines, and vocabularies drawn from the Islamic heritage. In this sense, the Brotherhood is an evolving organization, one that rolls with history and rationally adjusts its doctrines in relation to changing circumstances. Many observers hope that as the Muslim Brotherhood engages further in the political process—with its necessary compromises, negotiations, and coalition building—the movement will function as mid-wife to a true pluralist democracy.

On the other hand, despite this institutional and doctrinal flexibility, the Muslim Brotherhood’s policies are in the end bounded by ideology. Just as Socialism’s various expressions trace back to the proposition of social ownership, so too does the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology adhere to a basic premise: the idea that sovereignty resides with God, not with people. God holds dominion over his creation, and through the agency of prophecy has provided humankind with laws, regulations and advice (the Shari'a) for righteous and purposeful living. It is true that medieval Muslim jurists distinguished between duties owed to God, such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, which are immutable, and rulings relating to economic and social life, which adapt to the changing requirements of time and locality. But even in this second, interpretive sphere, jurists were clear that judgments must conform to Qur’anic principles. Although in the Islamist perspective, conformity to the divine guidance guarantees man’s freedom from tyranny and debilitating vice, from a normative human rights perspective, the strictures posed by this adherence are problematic.

Will the Muslim Brothers be able to engage the new, more open political process in ways amenable to political compromise, negotiation, and coalition building? Is the movement capable of addressing the practical needs of the people? On several hard issues—especially concerns related to cultural, gender, and religious minority rights—the Muslim Brotherhood has dithered. Perhaps it is the case that its deeply-divided leadership has not yet come to a consensus. But one thing is clear: Should the Brothers
prevail in the constitutional, legislative, and executive domains of the state, it may be that Egypt will transform into what Fareed Zakaria has termed an “illiberal democracy,” one characterized by the tyranny of the majority.

**Political Pragmatism Tops Fundamentalist Ideology**

Since its foundation in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has been guided by realism and open to change within the framework of its ideology. Initially, the organization was concerned primarily with the creeping westernization that its founder, Hasan al-Banna, blamed for Islam’s civilizational malaise. In this view, moral weakness made the Muslim world vulnerable to European conquest and occupation. In his efforts to regenerate Egypt and the Muslim world, al-Banna called upon his followers to focus on the “pure” Islam of the earliest generations of Muslims, and to excise from their faith later, ostensibly corrupt beliefs and practices. In 1932, al-Banna moved the movement’s headquarters to Cairo. Membership numbers are difficult to discern, but by the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood claimed in Egypt some 500,000 members and supporters, mostly from the lower and middle classes. Organizationally, the Brotherhood was close to the secular nationalist groups and parties, including the proto-fascistic Young Egypt and the more respectable Wafd Party. Like these, the Brotherhood had a hierarchical command structure capable of mobilizing supporters against opponents: the British and their domestic “collaborators,” and Zionists in neighboring Palestine.

Al-Banna believed that ideological “acquaintance” and organizational “formation” should precede the “execution” of the Brotherhood’s reformist mission. Consequently, the Brotherhood devoted much of its energy to missionary work and advocacy (da’wa). During the 1930s and 1940s he penned his famous “messages” to Egypt’s King Faruq,
enjoining the monarch to fear God and to implement the *Shari'a* in its entirety. But al-Banna was also a shrewd and pragmatic political operator. While he condemned political parties as divisive forces in society, at one point he proposed that the Muslim Brotherhood join the Nationalist Party, whose popularity he hoped would further the cause of his own movement. In March 1942, he fielded 17 aspirants in the parliamentary election until pressure from the government forced him to withdraw the candidacies, but only after it promised him to enact morally-informed legislation.

Beneath the Muslim Brotherhood’s reformism, however, lurked a militant spirit, which was expressed in its paramilitary youth organization (the Rover Scouts) and especially in the “Secret Apparatus (*al-Jihaz al-Sirri*), a faction within the Brotherhood founded in the early 1940s (the precise date is uncertain) that engaged in political violence. In March 1948, members of the apparatus assassinated a judge, Ahmed El-Khazindar Bey, President of the Court of Appeal, who had sentenced a Muslim Brother to prison for attacking British soldiers. When the government responded by dissolving the Brotherhood, a Brother assassinated the prime minister, Nuqrashi Pasha. In February 1949, al-Banna was himself gunned down in the streets of Cairo, apparently on the order of the political authorities, and the movement was banned until 1951. Yet it is important to note that this violence did not spring naturally from the Brotherhood’s ideology. Rather, it related to the contentious political culture of the time. Every faction in Egypt had its militia, and the Muslim Brotherhood was no exception.

*Sayyid Qutb and Organization ‘65*

When Colonel Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and the Free Officers came to power in 1952, many Muslim Brothers supported them, assuming that the military men might be convinced to implement Islamic law. But the Free Officers displayed no interest in establishing an Islamic state. When the still feisty Secret Apparatus made an attempt on Nasser’s life, Nasser responded by outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood in October 1954.
Hundreds of Muslim Brothers were imprisoned and four leaders executed on charges of sedition.

One of the imprisoned Muslim Brothers was Sayyid Qutb. The victim of torture, he transferred the odium he had previously directed at the politicians of Egypt’s Old Regime to the revolutionary government. In Qutb’s refurbished view, although the Nasser regime claimed to represent the interests of Muslims, its refusal to fully implement the Shari’a qualified it as a usurper of God’s sovereignty. In fact, wrote Qutb, so great was the level of oppression resulting from Nasserite “idolatry” that only a circle of adroit Muslims, a vanguard, could awaken the masses and mobilize them in the direction of effective change.

Qutb underscored the purported illegitimacy of the Egyptian Republic by equating its moral universe with the condition of jahiliyya, or “ignorance,” of the divine mandate. According to Qutb, as was the case in the pre-Islamic era, “ignorance” of God enveloped the world. Consequently, the strong oppressed the weak and vice prevailed over virtue. People, wrote Qutb, may believe in God and his Prophet, pray, fast, perform the Hajj, and dispense charity, but as long as their lives are not based on submission to God alone, they cannot be reckoned fully as Muslims. Qutb’s radical ideology confirms the contention that the totalistic quality of a revolutionary movement owes much to the authoritarian nature of the regime against which it is ranged.

The Nasser regime released Qutb from prison in 1964 but soon after rearrested him on the charge that he and dozens of other Muslim Brothers belonged to an underground cell intent on overthrowing the government—in fact, an incarnation of the Secret Apparatus. In support of its claim, the regime pointed to the stockpile of weapons that the group had amassed, and to its ideological positions, most notably, its censure of contemporary Muslim society. On August 29, 1966, Qutb and two of his associates were executed. Almost immediately Islamists elevated Sayyid Qutb to the status of martyr.
**Preachers, Not Judges**

The Muslim Brotherhood rebounded in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi wrote his tractate, *Preachers, Not Judges*, pledging that the Muslim Brotherhood would forever eschew violence and confrontation. Al-Hudaybi emphasized that the Muslim Brothers were preachers dedicated to the reform of society, not hanging judges of purported faux Muslims, as radical interpretations of Qutb’s doctrine suggested they ought to be.

Al-Hudaybi’s document set the stage for the Muslim Brothers’ accommodation with the authoritarian regimes of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. In return for compliance, the regime released many Brothers from prison and allowed the movement to resume its missionary activities. Perhaps inevitably, there were Brothers who sought to take advantage of the opening. During the rebuilding period, there emerged a younger cadre of Muslim Brothers, recruited from the university campuses, who aimed to take the Brotherhood in a more activist direction. This group of leaders led the Muslim Brotherhood in its domination of the professional syndicates and engaged the movement in parliamentary elections by allying with legal parties such as the New Wafd and Labor, or else by encouraging Brothers to run as independents.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Mubarak regime responded to the Brothers’ electoral successes by imprisoning its leaders and shutting down its publications. The Egyptian president then began to peg the Brotherhood as the source of all Islamic-oriented extremism in the world. The state’s persecutory stance prompted the Brotherhood’s old guard, men who had endured Nasser’s prisons and thus tended to be secretive and conservative, to put brakes on the younger reformers’ politicking. They worried that political activism was sidetracking the movement’s reformist mission and putting individual Brothers at risk of imprisonment. By 2000, the conservatives succeeded in pulling the Muslim Brotherhood in an isolationist direction – retreating from politics and shoring up basic, original ideological positions.
The Revolutionary Moment

Thus, when the demonstrations of 25 January, 2011 erupted, the Muslim Brotherhood was caught off guard. With tens of thousands protesting in the streets, the movement’s leadership vacillated. History presented a number of worrying scenarios, not only the hard lesson of Algeria in the early 1990s, but also the traumas experienced in Egypt in 1954 and 1965. Would Egypt’s powerful military allow an assertive Islamist movement to present itself as a serious political contender?

As it happened, the caution of the leadership was overtaken by events on the ground. After a few days, the movement’s youth leaders managed to pull the entire organization into the fray. The youth were more comfortable than the old guard, and even more relaxed than the generation of the 1970s, in jumping into an uncertain and volatile situation. Pressured from below, the leadership moved slowly to assert itself, taking careful stock of the evolving political field. Many observers supposed, probably incorrectly, that the Brotherhood was conniving with the military in order to affect some kind of power-sharing agreement.

The breakdown of Egypt’s authoritarian order and the opening of new possibilities mark the fourth and current stage of the Muslim Brothers’ history. Without question, this stage is the most consequential in the movement’s history, because now, out of necessity, it is compelled to operate under a fully political logic. Never before has the movement enjoyed the kind of latitude to act politically that it now enjoys. The activist reformers, who had earlier been sidelined, now have their opportunity.

But therein lies the challenge. As the Muslim Brotherhood moves from its customary oppositional stance, wherein lack of political prospects allowed ambiguity and idealism, it must now engage with the real world in pragmatic and even opportunistic
ways. Presently, it has no choice but to adapt to the rapidly-changing situation while remaining true to its founding principles. This is no easy task.

But the Muslim Brotherhood is no ordinary political organization. It is a movement of ethical and spiritual reform with myriad social and devotional activities. In fact, the Muslim Brothers have long believed that direct involvement in politics would sully the movement’s central mission of religious reform and renewal; that the maelstrom of politics would force it to abandon their goals in the pursuit of short-term political objectives. According to this line of reasoning, engaged in electioneering under its own banner, the Brotherhood would transform into the very type of entity it has historically despised. It was for this very good reason, many Brothers intoned, that al-Banna had backed away from hizbiyya, party factionalism, even though he had dipped his foot in its waters for pragmatic reasons.

The Freedom and Justice Party

The Muslim Brotherhood responded to this dilemma by forming on 30 April, 2011 the Freedom and Justice Party, which expresses Brotherhood ideology but exists separately from the parent movement. As a distinct entity, the party is able to engage freely with political contenders without compromising the traditional purposes of the parent movement. In order to underline this separateness, the Brotherhood requires that party leaders abandon their official positions in the movement prior to assuming office: no double dipping.

Once it entered the political fray, the Freedom and Justice Party did very well. In December 2011, it won a majority of seats in the country’s lower house of parliament, and in elections held in May 2012 gained the presidency, though only by a whisker. Both victories owed much to the Muslim Brotherhood’s deep social roots, mobilizing skills and nationwide presence, established in the 1980s and 1990s. As a consequence of these victories, the Muslim Brotherhood claims a mandate to govern.
What does the Freedom and Justice Party want for Egypt? Basically, a democratic polity that allows the popular will to express itself through Egypt’s existing institutions. To this end, it supports political pluralism and free-market capitalism with guards against corruption and monopoly. In addition, it seeks to roll back the influence of the military in political affairs. Although individual Brothers condemn Egypt’s treaty with Israel, both the party and the movement leadership have said they will uphold it, as they will uphold, with modifications, current restrictions on traffic through the Rafah crossing with Gaza. In these and other ways, the aspirations of the Freedom and Justice Party are not too different from those of most of the other political forces in the country, whether leftist or liberal.

*Human Rights and the Islamic Frame of Reference*

Where the Freedom and Justice Party differs from its competitors is in its insistence that the Egyptian civil state operate within an “Islamic frame of reference.” The phrase first appeared in the Muslim Brotherhood’s 2007 party draft platform. But what does it mean?

At first blush, the notion seems compatible with Egypt’s longstanding constitutional stipulation, in place since 1971, that civil law in the country be compatible with the principles of the *Shari’a*. This stipulation was deliberately vague and provided legislators of the Mubarak era with wiggle room to craft laws that ensured the basically secular nature of the state. But now, with its polling victory in the recent referendum on the constitution, the Muslim Brotherhood sees an opportunity to enhance the purview of the *Shari’a* by pegging it as the *primary* source of law in the country. True, in line with custom, this stipulation allows for the interpretation of the primary sources of law – the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad – and does not seemingly discount other, secular
bases of legislation. Yet in its deference to the principles of Shari‘a, including its “comprehensive evidence, its jurisprudential and fundamental bases and its recognized sources in Sunni sects,” the constitution opens the door to the enactment of legal particulars.

We don’t yet know the precise mechanism by which laws proposed by the legislature will be vetted with respect to their congruence to the Shari‘a, although article 4 of the constitution states that the “opinion” of Egypt’s most prominent religious institution, al-Azhar, is to be consulted in such matters. Yet there is some reason to hope that those attached to the party will take a moderate tact. The Muslim Brotherhood seeks domestic and international legitimacy for its governance, and for that reason does not want to appear extreme. But on the other hand, there are conservatives in the movement, and even the moderates within the party feel an authentic obligation to present a distinctive Islamic face.

Not only that, the Brotherhood now finds itself in competition with the puritanical Salafis for the allegiance of the conservative base. It was probably because President Morsi sought to indulge the more vociferous elements in this base that he initially allowed the Salafi-driven protests to take place at the US Embassy. Morsi had been elected to office on an Islamic platform, and he had to be seen to defend Islam against the notorious film that defamed the Prophet Muhammad.

Given the Muslim Brotherhood’s belief that it alone knows what is best for society, and taking into consideration the influence of conservative elements both within and without the movement, there is legitimate concern that Egypt’s emerging constitutional and legal framework may fall short of universal human rights standards, especially with regard to the rights of women and religious minorities. So for example, although article 68 of the constitution guarantees “equality between women and men,” it stipulates that this equality should be accomplished “without abandoning the judgments of the Shari‘a.” Some fear that such a stipulation could lead to interpretations that could lower the marriage age, condone domestic violence, and bar women and Christians from high
political office. It is in such debates that we discern the essential disjunction between Islamic law, based on attempts to discern God's will for humankind, and secular law, based on contingency and the primacy of human reason.

Of course, the Muslim Brotherhood’s most severe test will be on the economic front. Egypt’s economy is in tatters. People are out of work. Cairo looks tired and shabby. There is a general bleakness to the country as a whole. The crime rate remains high. Many of those who voted for former strongman Ahmad Shafiq in the presidential elections did so because they did not trust the Muslim Brotherhood to put Egypt’s house in order, even though they might have been sympathetic to the Brotherhood’s moral stance.

A *Midwife to Democracy?*

Many Egyptians, and many outside observers, despair at the prospect of Egypt under the sway of an Islamist political party, which they suspect is beholden to outmoded beliefs and practices. Others are optimistic and believe that the Muslim Brotherhood has not only the mandate but also the ability to lead Egypt to a brighter future. The country is now polarized. In their desire to topple the Brotherhood, the secularists have allied with elements of the despised former regime, and have used their entrenched position within the judiciary to stonewall Morsi and the Freedom and Justice Party. For their part, Morsi and his supporters have not shown the high-mindedness and inclusivity that one would expect of a democratizing movement at a threshold of history.

Certainly, the groups gathered within the National Salvation Front need to display more civility in their political dealings with the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, the Islamist government needs to demonstrate unequivocally that it will protect minority and women’s rights and freedom of speech. The Muslim Brotherhood has a track record of adaptability. Employing the instrument of *ijtihad* (independent effort to discern the
Shari‘a), its thinkers are capable of protecting and advancing human rights within an Islamic framework. It is an easy thing for Islamists to justify existing beliefs and practices as constitutive of God’s sovereignty. It is a nobler and far more difficult thing to imagine new possibilities within the purview of God’s rule over His creation. But this the Muslim Brotherhood must do if Egypt’s momentous transformation is to bear fruit.
About John Calvert

John Calvert holds the Henry W. Casper, SJ Associate Professorship in History at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. He is the author of Islamism: A Documentary and Reference Guide (2007) and Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism (2010). He is also co-editor and translator of Sayyid Qutb’s A Child from the Village.

Calvert’s research focuses on social protest and political resistance movements in the modern Middle East, as well as Egyptian nationalism and the ideological origins of al-Qaeda. He is especially interested in the ways by which opposition groups and individuals employ symbols, doctrines and vocabularies derived from the Islamic heritage.

He previously taught at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and McGill University in Montreal. His courses have included The Making of Modern Egypt, Change and Revolution in the Modern Middle East, Muhammad and the Rise of Islam, History of Islamic Civilization: The Classical Period, and Islam in the Modern World.

*The Literary Review* called Calvert’s book *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* “the product of both painstaking research into the Arabic sources and an impressive grasp of modern history and culture” that “presents a rounded picture of a man who, more than any other figure, both epitomized and articulated the cause of political Islam.” *The Atlantic Monthly* named it an “outstanding book from 2010 in Middle East Studies.” *Foreign Policy* named it a “best book of 2010.” *The Immanent Frame*, the Social Science Research Council’s blog on secularism, religion, and the public sphere, picked it as its “Book of the Week.”