Egyptian Islamism after Sisi’s coup

The 3 July 2013 military coup opened the bloodiest period in contemporary Egyptian history, and confronted an already divided Islamist movement with fateful choices between alternative ways of reacting.

There is scarce reason to believe that Islamism is on its way out of Egyptian politics. Despite the intense and violent suppression of which they are the primary victims, Islamists are still taking the lead in organising protest action around the country. Opinion polls conducted by institutions like the Pew Research Center and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy have shown continued significant support for the Muslim Brothers. To understand ongoing and future developments in the country it is therefore incumbent upon us to seek to grasp how the coup and its aftermath has impacted Egyptian Islamism.

The main struggle in Egypt today is one of democratic rule versus military-dominated authoritarianism. In Western discussions of Islamism, the question of moderation is often to the fore. Moderation is seen as the choice of non-violent methods or the adoption of liberal interpretations of the tenets of Islam. However, neither generally liberal views nor non-violent methods, nor their opposites either, by themselves indicate the degree of democratic attitudes. This latter point is in focus here: Has the coup strengthened or weakened the commitment of Islamists to democracy as a system of government?

Has the coup weakened the commitment of Islamists to democracy?

Before the Arab Spring, it was often stated that the real test of Islamist commitment to democracy would come the day an Islamist group arrived in power through elections. Would the Islamists continue to respect democratic procedures, or would they draw up the ladder behind them and introduce an...
authoritarian rule with themselves as the new select elite? Only in Tunisia have Islamists so far had the opportunity to show how they in an election-based position of power would react to a crisis, and they seemingly passed this test well, through taking part in a negotiated compromise which preserved the new democratic institutions. In Egypt, a similar crisis ended in a military coup. So how has the experience of winning elections and of then being deprived of the fruits of victory impacted upon the Islamists? Based on Egyptian history and on the ideological reservoir of Islamism, one might expect one of several possible reactions. One would be to fall back to a resigned accommodation in the face of the brute force of the deep state, while continuing a long-term effort at spreading Islamic revival and offering welfare wherever the state fails. One important actor has chosen this road, the main party of the conservative salafist trend, *Hizb al-Nur*. Another option would be to declare that democracy is anyway just a Western fallacy that will only end in tyranny. Jihadi groups that have emerged since the coup, like *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*, are close to this view. But the overwhelming response has been a third one: a strengthened principled defence of democracy. The whole process the Islamists have been through since the fall of Mubarak seems to have reinforced their will to fight for a system where the people decide the political course through elections.

### Interaction between political principles and political interests

It is important here to understand the interaction between political principles and political interests. The two main views of the transitional process after Mubarak’s fall were both characterised by a mixture of principled arguments and more opportunistic motivations. The Islamists, not least the Brothers, wanted elections fast. Partly they argued that it was necessary to rapidly establish political institutions based on the sovereignty of the people, and not let a long, drawn-out transitional period remain at the mercy of the goodwill of the military. Partly they considered that their own chances were good for winning elections or at least for establishing themselves as one of the strongest blocs in the new parliament. The secular groups claimed that before any elections could be held, a consensus on the principles for the country’s new ruling system must be reached through negotiations, and these principles must be expressed in a constitution acceptable to all. However, at the same time their view here was also influenced by their knowledge that their chances of winning significant influence in free elections were small.

The strengthened will among the Islamists to fight for democracy is also a composite of several factors. The Muslim Brothers, as well as the former jihadists now grouped in the Party of Building and Development (*Hizb al-Bina’ wal-Tanmiya*), had arrived at a principled commitment to democratic rule through extensive internal discussions well ahead of the revolution. The post-revolution elections gave the Islamists a foretaste that democracy
could bring with it real influence for them. As the elections did not give an outright majority to the Brothers alone, this feeling also pervaded the most important non-MB Islamist groups. The coup did away with their incipient positions of influence. Now, democracy is not, as it was before, only something wished for but never experienced. It is something one had achieved but was then deprived of. The bloodshed and the general persecution to which the Islamists have been exposed work to reinforce what has now, as it were, become an internalisation of the defence of democracy within the Islamists’ core ideas of justice and rejection of tyranny.

**Democracy: Something one had achieved but was then deprived of**

Here we arrive at a central issue. For this important result does not necessarily come into view if we adopt the perspective of the moderation-radicalisation dichotomy. From that perspective, the most moderate group would be *Hizb al-Nur*, which accepted the coup, or maybe the reformist Strong Egypt Party (*Hizb Misr al-Qawiyah*), led by the former MB leader Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh, which had supported the 30 June demonstrations against Mursi that precipitated the coup, and which have at times seemed willing to seek an understanding with the new power holders. If, on the contrary, we adopt support for democracy as our criterion, *Hizb al-Nur* is distinguished by the lack of a principled attitude, and by its will to accommodate the new authoritarian rule as long as its own parent movement may preserve its freedom of social action reasonably intact. In clear opposition to this, the broad Islamist-dominated Alliance to Support Legitimacy and Reject the Coup, formed by the Muslim Brothers and a range of other Islamist groups, notably the reformist *Hizb al-Wasat* and the salafi *Hizb al-Watan*, as well as the former jihadists in the Party for Building and Development, insists on defending democratic legitimacy.

The coup has thus drawn a new dividing line through Egyptian Islamism, which is not related to the degree of liberal interpretation of *sharia* or to the attitude towards armed jihad for the cause of Islam, but to the will to defend popularly elected institutions and thereby democracy. This dividing line cuts across the distinction between salafis, Muslim Brothers and reformists. Important parts of the politicised *salafis*, including the previous generation of jihadists, who used to reject the idea of democracy, now have emerged as emphatic defenders of it.

Those who have not, *Hizb al-Nur*, have significant problems with the youth among its own constituency, who are drawn towards resistance against the coup regime. The historical position of the party’s parent organisation, the Salafi Call (*al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya*) also casts its shadow here. The group had shared in the typical salafi view that politics was something to be avoided, and that the duty of the believer was to obey the ruler. In this light, the party’s actions after 3 July, despite its recent programmatic commitment to democracy, can be seen as a fall-back to
an apolitical accommodation vis-à-vis whoever controls the physical power in the country at any given time.

**Conclusion**

Among the Muslim Brothers, the support for the 'defence of legitimacy' is near total. The MB has rejected in any way recognising the 3 July takeover of power. By also boycotting the referendum on the new constitution in January 2014 and the presidential elections that followed in May, both the Brothers and the Alliance have upheld as a basic demand that the military's actions on 3 July 2013 and any result springing from them must be annulled. Through its boycott of the constitutional referendum and the presidential elections, the party may have preserved some of its legitimacy as a defender of democracy, even if its unwillingness to take direct part in the front against the coup has cost the party dearly, especially among the more Islamist-oriented section of its younger followers.

On the fringes of the resistance against the new regime, armed groups like the IS-allied Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are gaining a certain traction among disillusioned Islamist youth. But apart from Bayt al-Maqdis, even among the radicalised youth who are drawn towards some forms of violent action, and who call for revolution rather than gradual reform of the system, what is being held against Sisi is not his failure to implement Islamic law, but his trampling on the freedoms and democratic rights of the people.

- Pressure should be put on Egyptian authorities to lift the ban on oppositional movements and to release all political prisoners.
- Where feasible, dialogue should be kept open with Islamist movements, with special focus on the possibility of trust-building measures vis-à-vis other parts of the opposition to the current regime.

---

**The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)**

_A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs._