Accommodation or Fight for Democracy?
Egyptian Islamism after Sisi’s coup

Introduction

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. The present report explores how the coup has influenced Egyptian Islamism.1

This question is an important one, since 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 have shown continued significant support for the Muslim Brothers.2

In the voluminous literature on Islamism, a frequently discussed dichotomy is that between moderation and radicalisation. A main question posited is in which of these directions Islamists are being moved by, respectively, inclusion in or exclusion from political participation. Moderation has been defined in various ways. Some determine the concept as denoting a general turn towards liberal views, as a ‘movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives’.3 Otherwise it is common to emphasise the methods Islamist favour. Gudrun Krämer has defined moderate Islamism as ‘those Islamic groups and activists who formally declare their respect for, and commitment to, pluralism and the democratic principle and renounce the use of violence in achieving their objectives’.4

1 Under current conditions in Egypt it is impossible to conduct fieldwork research among oppositional Islamists, and their access to print media is very limited. This report is therefore largely built on information gathered from non-Islamist internet based news media, as well as from Islamist websites as a source for their views.


Yet this dichotomy hardly throws any light on the political role played by the Islamists in the ongoing struggle over democratisation in the Middle East. There are two reasons for this, and they are connected to the two elements in the definition of moderation. First, there is no necessary correlation between generally liberal views and the will to submit oneself to a system where the majority decides through elections. This has been demonstrated with clarity in Egypt through the behaviour of self-declared liberal and leftist groups, where many of them supported the new military-dominated regime after 3 July 2013. Secondly, neither is there an automatic connection between non-violence and democratic attitudes. Passively accommodating oneself to the rule of whoever at any time controls the strongest physical force is not necessarily the expression of a strong commitment to democracy. And in particular in situations where democratic institutions have been removed by force, it is difficult to argue in principle why an attempt to reintroduce them through the application of physical counter-force is in itself undemocratic. Whether the use of such force is advisable or is likely to yield positive results is another matter.

Thus neither generally liberal views nor non-violent methods, nor their opposites either, indicate by themselves the degree of democratic attitudes. This report focuses directly on this issue, and asks the question: Has the coup strengthened or weakened the commitment of Islamists to democracy as a system of government?

After the revolution in 2011 the Islamists scored important victories. In the period between Mubarak’s resignation and the ousting of Mursi, they enjoyed greater freedom of action than at any time since the early 1950s, including the right to form political parties and freely compete for elected office. And they had great success in the elections for parliament and for president in 2011 and 2012.

At the same time, the new, more liberal, atmosphere triggered a marked tendency towards Islamist fragmentation. Until then, the Muslim Brothers (MB) had enjoyed what amounted to a quasi-monopoly as a political expression of Islamist sentiment. Now both the more conservative salafis as well as reformist defectors from the Brotherhood joined the political fray, so that at the time of writing, there are about 15 competing Islamist political parties in Egypt.

Almost immediately after the fall of Mubarak, secular opinion began to express apprehension about and resentment of the growing power of the Islamists. The entry of Islamists into positions of political power after the elections was also met by obstacles put in their way by the judiciary and other elements of a state apparatus largely intact since Mubarak’s rule. The frontlines hardened during Mursi’s presidency, and Sisi’s coup soon vowed to eliminate all gains the Islamists had made since the revolution.

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Based on an analysis of how Islamist groups and individuals have reacted towards the coup, the current report makes two important points: (1) diverging attitudes vis-à-vis the coup have created new divisions among the Islamists, which will be of huge importance in the years ahead. Earlier divisions, like those between salafis and Muslim Brothers and between conservatives and reformists, now overlap with a new division rooted in the various reactions to 3 July 2014. Groups that have supported the coup or have hesitated in their position to it will have to struggle hard to preserve their legitimacy especially among their activist followers. (2) Within the broad front resisting the coup, there is marked tension between a reinforced commitment to democracy and a certain re-emergence of intolerant jihadist ideas in the mould of al-Qa’ida. Intertwined with this tension, but not identical to it, are questions over the legitimacy of the use of violence as well as opposition between gradualist and revolutionary ideas. Within the mainstream, there is a strong focus on defending the legitimacy that emerges from elections. Through this, the internalisation of a principled defence for democratic procedure is strengthened. Simultaneously, and partly in reaction to lack of opposition to the coup from self-styled liberal Egyptian groups and from Western governments, views inspired by the radical ideas of Sayyid Qutb are gaining a certain traction. This radicalisation also carries with it a strengthening of sectarian identity, and corresponding negative attitudes towards secularists, Christians and ‘deviant Muslims’.

Democracy? Islamism?

There are many competing definitions of democracy, and what typically varies is the degree to which the definition aims not only at pronouncing what democracy means, but includes, more broadly, factors that provide for a well-functioning liberal democracy. Still we find as a dominant view that (representative) democracy at its core involves (a) the effective executors of power being elected by the people, (b) voting rights and the right to run for office being universal and (c) elections being free and fair. This last point presumes a minimal degree of political freedom: freedom of expression and of organisation. The question of commitment to these principles becomes crucial, not least during a phase when an authoritarian regime has been overthrown or is in crisis and the way forward is yet to be decided. In our analyses of events during and after the Arab spring, it is necessary to look beyond ideological name tags and evaluate how various parties movements and persons have acted in decisive situations, in order to assess their role in relation to the fight over the future system of rule. There has been broad agreement that the elections that took place in Egypt in 2011 and 2012 satisfied criteria (b) and (c) above. However, the military coup put the question bluntly: To what degree do the elected representatives of the people have the right to exercise power? Are certain organs of the state legitimately placed above the elected representatives of the people?

What is Islamism? Here I employ the definition presented in my book Islamismen: ‘an ideological tendency which claims that Islam as a religion does not only concern the relation of the individual to God, but involves divine regulations that should guide also social, judicial and

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6 ‘Revolutionary’ used here in the sense of the call for an immediate total break with the old system.
7 Interviews with opposition activists, Cairo December 2014.
political relations in Muslim societies’. In the Egyptian setting, it should of course be taken into consideration that the Egyptian constitution has since 1981 (and including the two post-revolutionary constitutions of 2012 and 2014), included in its Article 2 the stipulation that “the principles of the Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation”. Post-2011 all the major political parties have supported the upholding of this formulation. Still, there is hardly any doubt locally in Egypt about which parties are considered Islamist and secularist respectively; the latter term in this connection tends to mean little more than not being part of the Islamist tendency.

**Troubled transition**

Egypt's first free parliamentary elections since 1950 took place in the period from November 2011 to February 2012. Islamists came to dominate the new national assembly by virtue of a large majority of deputies, with 68 percent of the seats in the legislative lower house (Majlis al-Sha'b) and 83 percent of the elected seats in the consultative upper house (Majlis al-Shura). Their combined dominance gained added significance because according to the roadmap for transition to democracy that was established through the March 2011 referendum, the two chambers would in a joint meeting name the members of an assembly tasked with writing a new constitution. As we now know, the transition did not go smoothly, though. The signs of this became increasingly clear after the parliamentary elections.

First, the more secularly oriented parties (often partly misguidedely categorised under the general terms 'leftist' and 'liberal'), shocked by the results of the elections, chose to vehemently attack the legitimacy of the constitutional assembly, claiming it was not representative.

Second, the core organs of the state, like the military, the police, the security forces, and the judiciary remained dominated by the same people who had led them under Mubarak. This entrenched leadership, especially within the police and security forces, had taken a major blow through the massive popular mobilisation for freedom, democracy and dignity in the spring of 2011.

However, already during the spring of 2012 it became clear that 'the deep state' was not prepared to transfer real power to new, popularly elected bodies. The ruling military council (SCAF) rejected bluntly calls for appointing a new government based upon a majority in the freshly elected parliament, and already in June 2012 moved to dissolve the parliament based on a court decision that it had been elected in an unconstitutional manner.

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11 For this reason in the rest of this report I employ the somewhat looser term secular to refer to the non-Islamist forces.
Shortly after this, Muhammad Mursi from the Muslim Brothers was elected president of the republic. However, after dissolving the parliament, the SCAF had arrogated legislative powers to itself till such a time as a new parliament would be elected. This was in clear contradiction of Egyptian constitutional practice, where in the absence of a parliament the president would temporarily assume its powers. The SCAF also established its own absolute control over the armed forces, despite the constitutional assignment of supreme command to the president. When Mursi was sworn in on 30 June 2012, his powers had thus been severely reduced. The military controlled legislation and all the forces of coercion in the country, and the elected parliament was gone, leaving Mursi to face the powerful state institutions on his own. In August 2012, he succeeded in replacing the top leaders of the SCAF, and in taking legislative powers for himself, but this would prove a limited victory.

Mursi’s isolation was intensified by the fact that the secular forces who had stood with the Islamists in the spring of 2011 in the struggle against Mubarak now more and more came to view the Muslim Brothers as enemies. A common understanding, not least among impatient young revolutionary activists, was (ironically, in view of later developments) that the MB had cut a deal with the deep state, giving them access to positions of power in return for refraining from enacting reforms. This view was reinforced by the unfolding dynamics with regard to the street demonstrations that were still frequent, demanding justice for those who fell during the revolution and their families, calling for economic reforms in favour of the poor, and opposing the continued limitations on the freedom of demonstration. The police and the security forces, which after January 2011 had remained largely absent from their traditional tasks of fighting crime and regulating traffic, used their habitual brutal methods against the demonstrators. Fatally, the MB were in this period primarily concerned with avoiding any crises that might derail the process towards transition to civilian rule. Thus they failed to protest vigorously against police violations, at times even seeming to defend police actions.

Just before the parliament was dissolved in June 2012, it had succeeded in appointing a new-composed constitutional assembly. In November, Mursi feared that the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) would dissolve this assembly too, and that the whole process towards civilian rule would then be thrown into uncertainty. He reacted by arrogating to himself extended powers and announced a decree to the effect that his decisions could not be overturned by any court. Shielded by this decree, Mursi and his group succeeded in letting the constitutional assembly finish a draft constitution, which was then confirmed in a referendum in December. However, before that, his November decree had triggered vehement reactions from the secular forces, who gathered for large demonstrations against Mursi, climaxing in front of the presidential palace in early December, marked by violent clashes in the absence of police forces, and with several fatalities on each side.

The stage was now set for the developments of the spring of 2013. Mursi tried to start a process towards new parliamentary elections based on the new constitution. However, it became ever clearer that the secular opposition did not aim to change the political balance through elections, but rather wanted Mursi deposed. Mursi’s presidency, and in particular the spring of 2013, witnessed increasing convergence and eventually cooperation between the secular opposition and the ‘deep state’ constituted by the military, the security forces...
belonging to the Ministry of the Interior, and the judiciary. With solid support from both these actors, a group of young people started the movement Tamarrud (Rebellion) and launched a campaign collecting signatures for a declaration withdrawing the people’s confidence from Mursi and demanding fresh presidential elections.13

Much remains unclear regarding the developments of spring 2013. What seems reasonably clear is that there existed a significant degree of popular dissatisfaction with the fact that apparently little positive was happening to resolve the problems experienced by the common people: poverty, corruption, traffic chaos and not least the lack of general security which had resulted from police withdrawal during the revolution. In the spring of 2013, this dissatisfaction melted into more and more embittered resistance from the secular opposition against the strengthening Islamist grip over government positions. In this situation, the state apparatus found the time ripe for acting against the Brothers, who with their strong anchoring in Egyptian society constituted an unpleasant challenge to the power monopoly of the established state elite. Central forces in Mubarak’s old political party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), also reactivated themselves, and their clientelist network of mobilisation throughout Egypt was put in motion. Elements of the business elite which had prospered during Mubarak’s rule played an important role as financers of the growing anti-Mursi campaigns. Reports have gradually emerged of early coordination between the deep state, former Mubarak loyalists and the group of young people who started Tamarrud. Whatever the truth is about this, the opposition successfully mobilised for demonstrations on 30 June, demanding Mursi’s resignation. The crowds who turned up in Cairo were probably larger than the largest demonstrations of the winter of 2011. The day of protest was followed up with an ultimatum from the leader of the armed forces to Mursi, and when the president refused to give in, on 3 July he was deposed on the order of General Sisi.14

When the army chief took power, he took care to present the matter as a correction of the revolution. The Brothers had misused their mandate; now the process towards a representative democracy would be restarted on a sounder basis. A roadmap was presented: a new constitution would be made, this time by a smaller group appointed by the authorities, and this would be followed by parliamentary and presidential elections.15 The head of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adli Mansur, was installed as president, and a government led by the economist Hazim al-Biblawi from al-Hizb al-Misri al-Dimuqrati al-Ijtima‘i (the Egyptian Social-Democratic Party) was appointed. The government also included several ministers from other non-Islamist parties.16

14 For a thorough discussion of the political developments in Egypt from the fall of Mubarak to the fall of Mursi, see Bjørn Olav Utvik, A Question of Faith? Islamists and Secularists Fight over the Post-Mubarak State, University of Oslo 2014. (Si hva slags publikasjon dette er).
15 ‘Egypt military unveils transitional roadmap’, Ahram Online, 3 July 2013, english.ahram.org.eg/News/75631.aspx.
16 Omar Halawi, ‘And where is the government?’, Mada Masr, 31 July 2013, www.madamasr.com/content/and-where-government
However, it soon became clear that the new regime was far less liberal than the SCAF’s rule from February 2011 till June 2012 had been, and more brutal than Mubarak’s regime ever was. Real power lay with the generals headed by Sisi. No scope was left open for critical voices. The Muslim Brothers and their allies mobilised big demonstrations against the coup in the weeks and months that followed. These protests were violently suppressed, with many killed and wounded. The climax came on 14 August, when police and security forces killed around 1,000 demonstrators in Cairo as they moved to dissolve the protest camps in the two squares of Nahda and Rabī’ al-Adawiyya. Many newspapers and TV stations were also closed down after the coup. The coup and the brutality exercised against the counter-demonstrations produced angry and sometimes violent reactions. Especially after the Rabī’ massacre, in addition to continued demonstrations, there were violent and sometimes armed attacks on police stations. Immediately after the 14 August carnage, there was a wave of arson attacks against Christian churches. Sisi and his people put the blame on the Muslim Brothers and redefined the political struggle in the country to be a government ‘war on terror’. A massive propaganda offensive was launched through government-controlled as well as private coup-friendly media, where resistance to the coup was labelled terrorism. In line with this development, the political basis of the coup regime was also gradually narrowed down. With one exception the secular opposition figures from Mubarak’s days disappeared from the government, which has since 1 March 2014 been headed by Ibrahim Mahlab, a former minister under Mubarak and a prominent member of his now dissolved government party the NDP. At the same time, the wave of arrests came to encompass not only all who explicitly supported the Brotherhood’s resistance against the coup, but also all others who openly criticised the regime, including a number of the most prominent young secular revolutionaries from January 2011.

The regime appointed a committee to design a new constitution. The Islamists, who had won close to 70 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections, were allotted 2 of the 50 seats on the committee. The constitution produced by the group of 50 appointees, which above all strengthened the military’s power, was approved in a referendum with moderate participation, albeit according to official results somewhat higher than in the constitutional referendum that took place in December 2012 during Mursi’s presidency. Later came presidential elections, formally a choice between two candidates, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi (who for this purpose resigned from the military where he had in the meantime been promoted to the rarely used rank of Field Marshal), and Hamdin Sabahi, a Nasserist who gained 20 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections in 2012, and who had supported the coup from the start. Low participation created panic in the ruling circles and the election was suddenly extended

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17 For a detailed account of these events, see Human Rights Watch: All According to Plan: The Rabī’ massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt, 2014, www.hrw.org/reports/2014/08/12/all-according-plan.
20 Recruited from among the few Islamists who supported the coup.
with one extra day, while all means were used to haul people to the ballot boxes. According to official results, Sisi received 97 percent of the votes, with his opponent receiving even less than the number of blank votes cast.22

The Islamists before the coup

Under Mubarak’s rule, the Islamists did not have access to forming political parties.23 Yet the Muslim Brothers sought political participation through running candidates on the lists of other parties and eventually primarily through its members running as independents for individual seats. Besides the Brothers, there were two other main tendencies within Egyptian Islamism: the salafis, who in general rejected political participation, concentrating instead on revivalist work focused on awakening the believers to strictly, literally copy what they saw as the correct Muslim practice that had been common during the Prophet’s time; and the jihadis, who were from the end of the 1970s and until 1997 involved in an armed conflict with the authorities, but who later revised their views and advocated peaceful political participation as the road to change.

With the feeling of freedom and optimism for democratisation that resulted from Mubarak’s fall, political participation became the call of the day for Islamists, including the salafis who had earlier shunned politics.

The Muslim Brothers (MB) rapidly went on to form Hizb al-Hurriyya wal-Adala (the Party of Freedom and Justice) with very close ties to the mother organisation. At the same time, the resentment against the Brotherhood’s conservative leadership, which had brewed over time among reform-oriented circles, was expressed in people leaving the MB to form alternative parties alone or together with more secular elements. The first was Hizb al-Wasat (the Centre Party), formed by a group that broke away from the Brotherhood already in 1996. Now a number of others followed, the most important of which was Hizb Misr al-Qawiyya (the Party for the Strong Egypt), established in the summer of 2012 by the long-time key MB leader Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh,24 after he had been thrown out of the Brothers in 2011 because he announced his candidacy for the coming presidential elections despite the MB’s decision of the time not to run its own candidate.

Former jihadists primarily grouped together in Hizb al-Bina’ wal-Tanmiya (the Party of Building and Development). Among the salafis, from the start Hizb al-Nur (the Party of Light), based in the strong network known as al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya (the Salafi Call)25 was dominant. It was this party which – together with the MB’s al-Hurriyya wal-Adala – formed the bulk of the Islamist majority in the national assembly following the elections of 2011-2012. Later, inner

23 With a certain exception for Hizb al-’Amal which was registered as a legal party in 1978 on a programme which blended Egyptian nationalism and socialist ideas, but which in the latter half of the 1980s adopted an Islamist-leaning programme and formed a close alliance with the Muslim Brothers. The party’s activity, however, was frozen by the authorities in 2000 and its newspaper al-Sha’b closed down.
tensions in *Hizb al-Nur* led to a split where a number of the main party leaders, in the winter of 2013, left to form a new party, *Hizb al-Watan* (the Party of the Nation/Fatherland), while *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* consolidated its power within the original party. In the spring of 2013, forces close to the charismatic independent *salafi* preacher and revolutionary agitator Hazim Abu Isma'il formed the *Hizb al-Raya* (Party of the Flag).

During Mursi's presidency, most Islamist wings exhibited more or less critical support for the president. Many criticised what they saw as the go-it-alone style of the Brothers, but nevertheless defended the legitimacy of the president as based in free elections. During the constitutional debate in the autumn of 2012, the *salafis* criticised the Brotherhood for not going far enough in instating the Islamic *Shari'a* as the basis of legislation, while groups like *Misr al-Qawiya* were primarily critical of the proposed constitution's failure to sufficiently reduce the powers of the presidency and the military.

### The Brothers after the coup: all or nothing?

The Muslim Brothers and their party immediately made crystal clear their refusal to accord any legitimacy to Sisi's actions on 3 July. Already, before the anti-Mursi protests of 30 June, they had organised a counter-front to *Tamarrud* which eventually adopted the name 'the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy and Reject the Coup' (*al-tahaluf al-watani li-da'am al-shar'iyya wa-rafd al-inqilab*). After 3 July 2013, this alliance has been the most important organised expression of resistance against the new regime. Politically it has been dominated by Islamists. In addition to the MB, the former jihadists in *Hizb al-Bina' wal-Tanmiya* and a number of smaller *salafi* parties have made part of the alliance, and until recently, so have *Hizb al-Watan* and the reformist *Hizb al-Wasat*. The Alliance has also had the support of more secularly oriented groups like *Ghad al-Thawra*, the party of Ayman Nur who ran against Mubarak in 2005 in Egypt's first multi-candidate presidential election.

The MB has refused to recognise in any way the 3 July take-over 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 of 3 July 2013 and any result springing from them must be annulled. This is reflected in the slogan 'Egypt has a president' (*misr laha ra'is*), which is a feature of the

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26 "Imad 'Abd al-Ghafur yu'llin 'an ta'sis hizb al-watan', *Yaqin*, 1 January 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpKEjjjVXBQ [Sjekk fotnoten her: ikke samsvar mellom netadresse (YouTube) og publiseringsssted (Yaqin).]
27 Amani Maged, 'No compromise', *Ahram Weekly*, 15 November 2012, weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/259/17/No-compromise.aspx
29 ‘11 Islamist parties launch "Legitimacy Support" alliance’, *Ahram Online*, 28 June 2013, english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/75145/Egypt/Politics--/Islamist-parties-launch-Legitimacy-Support-allian.aspx
30 See Wikipedia, ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/التحالف_الوطني_ل_دعم_الشرعية
Alliance’s Facebook page, with a picture of Muhammad Mursi. Time and again there have been speculations in the Egyptian media about whether the Muslim Brothers would eventually be willing to compromise and accept a deal of reconciliation that does not entail the return of Mursi to the presidency. Until now, these rumours seem not to have had much substance, even if such solutions have been hinted at by anti-coup circles outside the MB. Part of the background here is that Mursi never had any particular personal popularity and that the popular disaffection expressed on 30 June was to a large extent directed towards him. Yet several factors have worked against the possibility of a compromise on this point.

First, it rapidly became unequivocally clear that the aim of the coup was not only to get rid of Mursi, but as far as possible to crush the Muslim Brothers as an active political force in Egypt. The attempt has involved a bloody repression with several thousand killed and at least 20,000 jailed or interned. The national leadership and large parts of the leading cadres in the provinces and in major cities are either imprisoned or in exile. An intense campaign of demonisation of the organisation has been launched through virtually all Egyptian media. The message is that the Muslim Brothers are a terrorist organisation, something that was formally declared by the Egyptian government on 24 December 2013. On the anniversary of the 14 August Rabia massacre, where at least 800 demonstrators were killed by security forces, the front pages of several Egyptian newspapers exhibited large headlines celebrating the anniversary of the 'liberation of Rabia’.

Second, Muhammad Mursi himself, who was never a charismatic president, has, at least within his own constituency, increasingly become a symbol of proud and unbending resistance to the coup makers. Since the time of the coup, he has been kept prisoner at an unknown location, for long periods without access to his family or his lawyers, and has been carried by helicopter to short and tightly controlled sessions in the many court cases that have been raised against him. On these occasions, he has emerged unbowed and uncompromising in his rejection of the legitimacy of the coup.

So, in relation to potential compromise, on the one hand there is no indication that the coup regime is willing to offer a reconciliation which would entail renewed access to political participation from the Muslim Brothers, whatever the concessions made from the MB’s side; and on the other hand, any idea that the MB might be willing to consider dropping Mursi’s claim to the presidency as part of a reconciliation deal has been weakened by Mursi’s own upright demeanour during his imprisonment and trials.

There is scarce reason to trust analyses that see the Muslim Brothers as virtually eradicated from Egyptian politics. The organisation has deep roots in Egyptian society, grown over more than eighty years, and has before survived and returned strengthened from long periods of suppression. Even if demonstrations are, at the time of writing, smaller than in the immediate aftermath of the coup, the continued ability to mobilise in all areas of Egypt, despite the massive and violent suppression against its organisation, and with the national leadership mostly out of effective operation, shows that there is no reason to write off the Brotherhood. As mentioned above, several opinion polls show continued significant support for the Muslim

Brothers (and substantially higher than support for the secular parties). Even the continued intensity of the media campaign against the Muslim Brothers indirectly points in the same direction.

The Muslim Brothers face enormous challenges. There is an urgent need to find a sustainable strategy in the fight against the coup. Even if the organisation still exists and is active, it has been forced to absorb tremendous blows. Each new confrontation with the authorities continues to sap its force.\(^{33}\) Either it needs to adopt a long-term strategy for building new strength while waiting for the conditions for a new political offensive to mature, or it must rapidly seek to build a broad alliance among all forces that have turned critical towards Sisi and his rule. The Brussels declaration from May 2014, which was presented by a group of politicians belonging to different parties, among them Muhammad Mahsoub from Hizb al-Wasat and Yahya Hamid from the MB’s own al-Hurriyya wal-Adala, both former government ministers, was an attempt to establish a possible common platform. The declaration does not mention the reinstatement of Mursi as a demand, but points out the necessity of “removing the effects of the military coup, restoring the 25 January revolution, and resume the democratic process”, in addition to “establish[ing] an executive power which would represent pluralism and cooperation”.\(^{34}\) In August The Egyptian Revolutionary Council (Al-majlis al-thawri al-misri) was formed in Istanbul as an umbrella organisation for the Egyptian opposition in exile. Its platform is very close to the Brussels declaration. Mursi is mentioned by name, in condemning the coup makers for having ‘kidnapped the elected president, Muhammad Mursi’, but there is no explicit call for his reinstatement.\(^{35}\)

In the autumn of 2014, Hizb al-Wasat and Hizb al-Watan made public that they were leaving the Alliance, albeit without giving up their principled rejection of the coup.\(^{36}\) Spokesmen for Hizb al-Watan had made some critical statement to the effect that the public activity of the Alliance was not sufficiently built on consultation between the partners.\(^{37}\) On the other hand, several exiled al-Wasat leaders have been critical of their party’s withdrawal.\(^{38}\) There has been speculation that some of the motivation for the withdrawal was to open the scope for new and broader alliances. Simultaneously, in connection with the release of the prominent member of the MB, Hilmi al-Gazzar, in late August it was speculated that an initiative towards reconciliation existed, where it was envisioned that reform-oriented forces within the


\(^{34}\) ‘Muslim Brotherhood Praises Pro-Democracy Brussels Declaration’, Ikhwanweb, 13 May 2014, www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=31653


\(^{38}\) ‘Mahsub: atahaffaz ‘ala insihab al-wasat min tahaluf al-shar’iyya’, Murasilun, 30 August 2014, moraselon.net/2014/08/30/
Brotherhood would 'renounce violence' and would then in some form be given access to political participation. Such reports, however, should probably be understood as an attempt by the pro-regime media to create confusion and splits among the Islamists.

Through their electoral success after the revolution and the ensuing military coup against them, the Muslim Brothers have been thrown into a battle of life or death. The line they follow in this fight will for a long time greatly influence those generations that are in the midst of the confrontation, not least the youth who are taking the struggle to the streets. The simple fact that this fight is fought primarily on behalf of the legitimacy of popularly elected office, and not on behalf of an Islamic reform project or a Muslim revivalist agenda, is of great significance. This choice of focus is obviously connected to what is considered to be in the MB's best interest. However, on this point the situation is not much different from other struggles for democratic reforms throughout history: the reforms are pushed forward by groups of people who somehow think they will benefit from them. In parts of the broad front against the coup, the defence of Islam against godless secularists is held forth as a frame of understanding. Still, it is important that this is neither the official line nor the one which is prominent in the demonstrations.

The salafis between shari'a, shar'iyya and self interest

As mentioned above, in the parliamentary elections of 2011-2012, Hizb al-Nur, established by the salafist group al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya, was by far the dominant political expression of the salafi tendency. During Mursi's presidency, the party became steadily more critical and attacked the Brothers from two angles: the party thought that the supremacy of Shari'a was not sufficiently secured in the 2012 constitution, and it criticised the Brothers for monopolising rule. Hizb al-Nur never officially joined the call for protest demonstrations on 30 June 2013, but it called for a referendum on the resignation of the president if the demonstrations turned out to be substantial. Not least, the party accepted the coup on 3 July, and criticised the Brothers for their resistance. Hizb al-Nur now sought to promote itself as the responsible representative of Islamism, and one of its members joined the constitutional committee appointed by the new regime.

There are complex reasons for the party's course of action. One important factor is that al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya, by avoiding confrontation with the new rulers, has sought to protect the main part of its activities, which are still focused on religious revival and to a certain extent on charity work among the poor. This line may have become easier to follow after a more politicising wing centred on the first party leader split off in January 2013, to form Hizb al-Watan. Also, Hizb al-Nur saw the possibility of filling the vacuum left by the suppression of the

39 Amany Maged, 'Last Chance?', Ahram Weekly 28 August 2014, weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/7100/17/Last-chance-.aspx
42 'Egypt's constitutional committee marginalises Islamists: Nour Party', Ahram Online, 2 September 2013, english.ahram.org.eg/News/80570.aspx.
Muslim Brothers, to take their place as the primary political expression of Islamic piety. However, the historical position of al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya casts its shadow here. The group had shared in the typical salafi view that politics is something to be avoided, and that the duty of the believer is to obey the ruler. In this light, the party’s actions after 3 July, despite its programmatic commitment to democracy, can be seen as falling back to an apolitical accommodation vis-à-vis whoever controls the physical power in the country at any given time.

It is just as important, with regard to the effects of the coup on the Islamists, to note that the other salafi political groupings chose to stick to the defence of popularly elected legitimacy (either calling for the reinstatement of Mursi, or simply protesting against the coup makers’ violation of democratic rights), even when this exposed them to persecution and suppression.

The period after the coup has been problematic for Hizb al-Nur. The party has had to work hard to sustain its own legitimacy, not least among young members and sympathisers, something several party leaders have admitted.43 Most other salafi groups joined the Alliance to Support Legitimacy. Active among salafis is also Harakat Ahrar, a radical youth group to a significant degree recruited from among the followers of the salafi preacher Hazim Abu Ismail, and which opposes both the coup and the Brothers.44 Many young followers of Hizb al-Nur have been gravitating towards the various groups opposing the coup. In addition, the regime has so far shown scant gratitude towards the party. In June 2014, a new restrictive law banned all who lack the sufficient education from al-Azhar from preaching in the mosques.45 This ban affects many of the preachers of al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya, who are lay preachers, not least the main leading figure Yasir al-Burhami himself, who is a physician by education. At the time of writing, there is also a court case in process, in which the plaintiffs call for all religious parties to be dissolved in conformity with the constitution, among them Hizb al-Nur. The party’s future in Egyptian politics is thus highly uncertain.

The quandary of (some) reformists

Among those Islamists who have broken away from the MB and formed parties with a more unambiguously liberal platform, the response to the coup has been split, primarily expressed through the different course chosen by the two most important groups within this reformist trend, Hizb al-Wasat and Misr al-Qawiya. Hizb al-Wasat, which was formed in 1996, mostly by Muslim Brothers who left the mother organisation, chose to join the Alliance in solidarity with their old MB companions. Misr al-Qawiya, built around the charismatic Abd al-Mun‘im Abu al-Futuh, who left the Brothers only in 2011, took part in the demonstrations of 30 June 2013, and

45 ‘Egypt president Mansour signs law jailing unauthorised Islamic preachers’, Ahram Online, 5 June 2014, english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/103020/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-president-Mansour-signs-law-jailing-unauthor.aspx.
has kept its distance vis-à-vis the Alliance and the Brothers also after the coup.\textsuperscript{46} Even though \textit{Misr al-Qawiya} criticised the coup, the organisation has on several occasions hinted at willingness to accept the change of power as a fact and to participate under the roadmap presented by al-Sisi. The party ended up boycotting the two elections that have taken place: the constitutional referendum in January 2014 and the presidential elections in May of the same year.\textsuperscript{47} However, it has been reported that it intends to take part in the elections for a new parliament, which at the time of writing is scheduled to take place in spring 2015, even though Abu al-Futuh has demanded changes in the electoral law.\textsuperscript{48}

Again, there are complex reasons for the choice of different lines of action by the two parties vis-à-vis Sisi and his coup regime. \textit{Al-Wasat} had accepted the role of a junior partner to the Muslim Brothers, trusting that if the fledgling popularly elected civilian institutions could be preserved, the party would have a chance both to exercise a certain influence and simultaneously build organisational strength and a broad constituency over time. Not least through its leader, Abu al-Ila Madi, the party was played a significant role in the constitutional process in the autumn of 2012.\textsuperscript{49}

So why did \textit{Misr al-Qawiya} choose a different path? Abu al-Futuh’s break with the Muslim Brothers was much more recent than \textit{Hizb al-Wasat}’s break, and he had been a much more important leader in the MB than Madi had been. For over 20 years, he was a member of the leading organ of the Brotherhood, \textit{maktab al-irshad}, and for a while he was considered as a potential future top leader (\textit{murshid}).\textsuperscript{50} In the first round of the presidential elections in 2012, he secured 17 percent of the votes, while the Brotherhood electoral machine was able to whip up 25 percent in favour of Mursi.\textsuperscript{51} From the MB’s perspective, Abu al-Futuh was a far more threatening rival.

His aim was to build bridges across the sharp polarisation between Islamist and secular forces.\textsuperscript{52} When the \textit{Misr al-Qawiya} party was formed, it was also less dominated by former members of the MB than \textit{Hizb al-Wasat} was. In the post-coup situation, it was incumbent upon the party leadership to balance between opposition against the return of authoritarian rule on the one hand and sharp criticism of the Muslim Brothers on the other. The dividing line

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotetext[46]{Cornelis Hulsman, ‘A Conversation with Egypt’s Aboul Fotouh’, \textit{Middle East Institute}, 16 October 2013, www.mei.edu/content/conversation-egypts-aboul-fotouh.}
\footnotetext[48]{‘Kharitat intikhabat barlaman misr: tahalufat wa muqatun’, \textit{Al-Taqrir}, 5 September 2014, altagreer.com/general/ خريطة انتخابات برلمان مصر-تحالفات ومقاطع.}
\footnotetext[49]{Gamal Essam El-Din, ‘Islamists vs secularists on constitution’, \textit{Ahram Weekly}, 13 September 2012, weekly.ahram.org.eg/2012/1114/eg10.htm.}
\footnotetext[51]{en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_presidential_election_2012.}
\end{footnotesize}
between those who saw the coup makers as the greater evil, and those who prioritised their opposition to the MB, seemed to run right through the party.

To ride two horses is a difficult exercise under any circumstance. In Egypt after 3 July 2013, the attempt has made it next to impossible for *Misr al-Qawiya* to take the lead in expressing popular discontent and the desire for change. The party has to an extent reacted to this by withdrawing slightly from the front lines and focusing on working out its programme for social, economic and political reform, in the hope of being able to build a stronger position when conditions change.

The lack of direct religious references in the party programme raises the question of whether it should be counted as an Islamist organisation. It is considered so here because the party formation was initiated by, and is still at the time of writing led by, a long-time key leader among Egyptian Islamists. Studying its reaction in relation to the coup is therefore of great interest in seeking to understand Egyptian Islamism.

The reformists, then, like the salafis, are split in their reaction, as some joined the front opposing the coup, while others were willing to consider participation under a new regime emerging from the military’s overthrow of Mursi. *Misr al-Qawiya*’s boycott of the constitutional referendum and the 2014 presidential elections still point towards an effort to protect democratic principles.

**Jihadism on the rise again?**

In a long-time perspective there is a marked tendency from 1970s until the fall of Mursi of Egyptian Islamism moving in the direction of principled commitment to democracy as a form of rule, and at the same time towards a strategic line where peaceful political work is seen as the road to a better and more Islamic society, and where the use of violence is denounced. During the harsh repression of the Muslim Brothers under Nasser’s rule in the 1950s and 1960s, the main MB ideologue Sayyid Qutb developed a radical message in which he considered the Muslim society of his day to have fallen back to a condition of paganism like that *jahiliyya* (‘condition of ignorance’) which had prevailed before the Prophet Muhammad brought a new message from God that became the foundation of the Islamic faith. Qutb, who was executed in 1966, was interpreted in various ways, but significant groups in both Egypt and Syria adopted his writings as a basis for a declaration of armed *jihad* against local rulers they considered to have left Islam. These groups typically condemned the despotism of authoritarian rulers in their own countries, but in the Egyptian case also democracy, which they saw as a blasphemous idea imported from the West, prescribing a system in which humans make their own laws, while legislation is, according to Islam, the uninhibited prerogative of God.

Yet the decades following Qutb’s execution became marked in Egypt by a strengthened commitment to democracy and to peaceful political work among Islamists. This holds true for the Muslim Brothers, but interestingly it also turned out to be the result in the long run for many of the militant would-be disciples of Qutb. In Syria, a similar development took place
inside the Muslim Brothers after the crushing defeat of the Islamist uprising in that country in 1982.

Already in 1969 the top leadership in the Brotherhood had made known a sharp criticism of Qutbian radicalism (albeit without mentioning his name), where they especially condemned all ideas of takfīr (denouncing other Muslims as infidels). Under Umar al-Tilmisāni’s period as murshid from 1973 the basis was laid for a strategic choice in the direction of rejecting the use of violence as a method for internal reform in Muslim societies. At the same time it was decided that the MB would try to win influence through participating in political elections where possible, a strategy that was put into practice for the first time in the parliamentary elections of 1984.

It was of decisive importance that the majority of the large Islamist student movement that emerged in the 1970s eventually joined the MB and gravitated towards Tilmisāni’s line. Many of the student leaders from the 1970s later became instrumental in pushing for a more explicit and principled acceptance of democracy as the preferred system of rule in Egypt.

Yet a minority within the student movement had, inspired by Sayyid Qutb, declared an armed jihad against the authorities, and were, especially in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, involved in low intensity warfare with the police and security forces, which entailed attacks against police stations, but also in some cases attacks against Christian institutions in the country and against foreign tourists. However, even before the late culmination of this in the massacre of 58 tourists in Luxor in November 1997, the imprisoned leadership of the most important jihadist organisation, al-Jama’a al-Islāmiyya, had called for an end to armed struggle. In the years that followed, they went on to publish a comprehensive revision of their ideology, in which even they now declared themselves to be supporters of democracy and peaceful political work. It is noticeable that after 1997 no armed attacks took place based in the Jama’a (when armed jihadist actions re-emerged in the mid-2000s, they almost exclusively happened in Sinai, and were mostly rooted in a combination of Beduin grievances, Palestinian militancy, and global jihadi networks, and represented a new phenomenon, largely separate from earlier Egyptian jihadism).

All the main groups in the Alliance to Support Legitimacy have, in their official declarations, continued their defence of democracy and of peaceful methods, also in the fight against the coup. That is true for the Brotherhood and its party, as well as for Hizb al-Wasat, the salafi party Hizb al-Watan, and Hizb al-Bina’ wal-Tanmiya, which has its roots among the former jihadists of al-Jama’a al-Islāmiyya.53

Nevertheless, since the coup Egypt has seen a surge in the number of armed attacks against police stations, government institutions, gas pipelines, and in some cases against military posts. There have also been violent clashes in connection with demonstrations, and there have

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been many instances of arson attacks on Christian churches, in particular just after the massacres against the protest camps at Rabi’a and Nahda on 14 August 2014.

The *jihadi* group *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* have claimed responsibility for some of the more bloody and spectacular actions. This group is based in Sinai and represents, in a sense, a continuation of the armed actions that took place there in the years preceding the revolution. Their ideology is close to that of the Islamic State, to which the group has recently declared its allegiance.54 Still, an important factor behind the Sinai insurgency, of which *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* is but one of many rebel groups, is what many local inhabitants see as discrimination and harassment against the Sinai Bedouin population.55

The current Egyptian regime has labelled the Muslim Brothers terrorists, and tries to win support for this internationally.56 In the regime’s propaganda, enthusiastically seconded by most Egyptian media, there are only insignificant differences between *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*, MB and other Islamist tendencies which refuse to accept the 3 July coup. Pro-regime media present all violence as if it is linked to the Brothers, and strive to erase the boundaries between terror and any physical confrontation with security forces during demonstrations.57 Yet it is clear that in Egypt, like in other countries where democratic elections have been aborted or democratically elected leaders deposed through a military coup (as in Algeria in 1992 and Chile in 1973), fresh discussion has arisen, among those who oppose the coup, as to the legitimacy of the use of violence. This discussion takes place on at least two interconnected, but nevertheless distinct, levels. One discussion is over whether, when democratically elected forces and more generally peaceful demonstrators are met with violent suppression, they have the right to fight back: the right to themselves use physical counter-violence, to make the regime pay a price as it were, for their violation of democracy and human rights. And if they have the moral right to do so, there is the question of whether they should. As stated above, the general line has been a call to keep to peaceful means, not only from the Muslim Brothers, but also from groups which advocate a more radical systemic break with the old state.58 Yet on the margins of the movement for democracy there have been reports of people arguing, for instance, that attacks on police vehicles are legitimate, because it impedes the oppressive apparatus in its attacks on demonstrators.

54 To underline its allegiance to IS, the Group also renamed itself the Sinai Province of the Islamic State.
57 For a recent example of the genre, see Hind Adil et al., ‘*Muzaharat mahduda li-tullab al-ikhahiyat bi-jam’atay al-qahira wal-azhar*’, *Al-yawm al-sabi’*, 15 October 2014, www.youm7.com/story/2014/10/15/1907572/طالبا_والأزهر_بالقاهرة_بجامعتى_الإرهابية_لمظاهرات_محدودة#.VEdzUyKgX5M.
At another level, some forces are challenging the whole idea of gradual change of the current oppressive and corrupt system by way of elections. For instance, the Harakat Ahrar mentioned above insists that attempts at reform through winning elections or negotiating with the authorities are futile; this only leads one to be caught in an illusionary game. The only way to proceed is with a total break from the current system, and to strive for ‘independence from the global regime of occupation and a total break with is values and then building a new social, economic and political system emerging from the fundament of the values of our faith’.  

However, there is no one-to-one connection between the discussion of violence and the question of democracy. Going back to the Egyptian jihadi uprising in the 1980s and 1990s, we see that the rebels’ proclaimed basis for their insurrection was what they considered the ruling elite’s apostasy. Today, the basis for resistance against Sisi’s regime is that it is based on a violent coup against a democratically elected president. Simplifying, we may say that while al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya was at that time fighting for Shari’a, now the former jihadists and the rest of the Alliance are fighting for al-shar’iyya, the (democratic) legitimacy. And with the exception of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, this holds true also for most of those who are willing to accept certain forms of violence in the fight against the regime. The same goes for the revolutionary rhetoric of Harakat Ahrar. While they remain vague on their preferred system of rule, by itself their idea that the mere taking place of elections does not make a revolution if all the other power relations are otherwise intact, is not itself a rejection of democratic rule.

Where are Egyptian Islamists heading?

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 procedure, 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 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 reaction would be to fall back on 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, Hizb al-Nur. Another option would be to declare that democracy is just another Western fallacy that will only end in tyranny. Jihadi groups like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are close

to this view. However, 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 themselves decide the political course through elections.

It is important here to understand the interaction between political principles and political interests. As I have discussed elsewhere, 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 good will of the military. Partly they considered that their own chances were good for winning elections or at least to establish themselves as one of the strongest blocs in the new parliament. The secular groups, on their side, 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. At the same time, their view here was 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, had arrived at a principled commitment to democratic rule through extensive internal discussions well ahead of the revolution. The post-revolution elections gave a foretaste that democracy could bring with it real influence for the Islamists. This feeling pervaded also the most important non-MB Islamist groups, in particular because the elections did not give an outright majority to the Brothers alone. The coup did away with their incipient positions of influence. Now democracy was not, as it was before, only something that was wished for but never experienced. It was something that 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 into the Islamists’ core ideas of justice and rejection of tyranny.

Here we arrive at a core issue. For, this important finding does not necessarily come into view if we adopt the moderation-radicalisation dichotomy. From that perspective, the most moderate would be Hizb al-Nur, which accepted the coup, or maybe Misr al-Qawiya. 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 mother movement may keep its freedom of social action reasonably intact. In clear opposition to this, the broad Islamist-dominated front against the coup insists on defending democratic legitimacy.

The coup has drawn a new dividing line in Egyptian Islamism, which is unrelated to the degree of liberal interpretation of Shari’a or to the attitude towards armed jihad for the cause of Islam,

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but concerns the will to defend popularly elected institutions and thereby democracy. This dividing line cuts across the distinction between salafis, Brothers and reformists. Important parts of the politicised salafis, including the previous generation of jihadists, who used to reject the idea of democracy, have now emerged as emphatic defenders of that same principle. Those who have not made the same transition, Hizb al-Nur, have significant problems with the youth among its own constituency, who are drawn towards resistance against the coup regime. Among the Muslim Brothers, the support for the 'defence of legitimacy' is near total. Among the reformists, on the other hand, there are marked disagreements, as Hizb al-Wasat took part in resistance against the coup from the outset, while Misr al-Qawiya adopted a more conciliatory line and attempted to take the new regime at its word to the effect that a democratic transition would be restarted. Through its boycotts of the constitutional referendum and the presidential elections, the party may have preserved some of its legitimacy as defenders 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.

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.