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Separation of Religion or Belief and State

EGYPT – ROLE OF ISLAM IN PUBLIC LIFE

Three articles from the *New York Times*

In Egypt's Democracy, Room for Islam
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In Egypt's Democracy, Room for Islam

The New York Times, Op-Ed, Saturday, April 2, 2011

By ALI GOMAA

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LAST month, Egyptians approved a referendum on constitutional amendments that will pave the way for free elections. The vote was a milestone in Egypt's emerging democracy after a revolution that swept away decades of authoritarian rule. But it also highlighted an issue that Egyptians will grapple with as they consolidate their democracy: the role of religion in political life.

The vote was preceded by the widespread use of religious slogans by supporters and opponents of the amendments, a debate over the place of religion in Egypt's future Constitution and a resurgence in political activity by Islamist groups. Egypt is a deeply religious society, and it is inevitable that Islam will have a place in our democratic political order. This, however, should not be a cause for alarm for Egyptians, or for the West.

Egypt's religious tradition is anchored in a moderate, tolerant view of Islam. We believe that Islamic law guarantees freedom of conscience and expression (within the bounds of common decency) and equal rights for women. And as head of Egypt's agency of Islamic jurisprudence, I can assure you that the religious establishment is committed to the belief that government must be based on popular sovereignty.

While religion cannot be completely separated from politics, we can ensure that it is not abused for political gain.

Much of the debate around the referendum focused on Article 2 of the Constitution — which, in 1971, established Islam as the religion of the state and, a few years later, the principles of Islamic law as the basis of legislation — even though the article was not up for a vote. But many religious groups feared that if the referendum failed, Egypt would eventually end up with an entirely new Constitution with no such article.

On the other side, secularists feared that Article 2, if left unchanged, could become the foundation for an Islamist state that discriminates against Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

But acknowledgment of a nation's religious heritage is an issue of national identity, and need not interfere with the civil nature of its political processes. There is no contradiction between Article 2 and Article 7 of Egypt's interim Constitution, which guarantees equal citizenship before the law regardless of religion, race or creed. **After all, Denmark, England and Norway have state churches, and Islam is the national religion of politically secular countries like Tunisia and Jordan**. The rights of Egypt's Christians to absolute equality, including their right to seek election to the presidency, is sacrosanct.

Similarly, long-suppressed Islamist groups can no longer be excluded from political life. All Egyptians have the right to participate in the creation of a new Egypt, provided that they respect the basic tenets of religious freedom and the equality of all citizens. To protect our democracy, we must be vigilant against any party whose platform or political rhetoric threatens to incite sectarianism, a prohibition that is enshrined in law and in the Constitution.

Islamists must understand that, in a country with such diverse movements as the Muslim Brotherhood; the Wasat party, which offers a progressive interpretation of Islam; and the conservative Salafi movements, no one group speaks for Islam.

At the same time, we should not be afraid that such groups in politics will do away with our newfound freedoms. Indeed, democracy will put Islamist movements to the test; they must now put forward programs and a political message that appeal to the Egyptian mainstream. Any drift toward radicalism will not only run contrary to the law, but will also guarantee their political marginalization.

Having overthrown the heavy hand of authoritarianism, Egyptians will not accept its return under the guise of religion. Islam will have a place in Egypt's democracy. But it will be as a pillar of freedom and tolerance, never as a means of oppression.

Islamist Group Is Rising Force in a New Egypt

March 24, 2011: New York Times

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

CAIRO — In post-revolutionary Egypt, where hope and confusion collide in the daily struggle to build a new nation, religion has emerged as a powerful political force, following an uprising that was based on secular ideals. The Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group once banned by the state, is at the forefront, transformed into a tacit partner with the military government that many fear will thwart fundamental changes.

It is also clear that the young, educated secular activists who initially propelled the nonideological revolution are no longer the driving political force — at least not at the moment.

As the best organized and most extensive opposition movement in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was expected to have an edge in the contest for influence. But what surprises many is its link to a military that vilified it.

"There is evidence the Brotherhood struck some kind of a deal with the military early on," said Elijah Zarwan, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. "It makes sense if you are the military — you want stability and people off the street. The Brotherhood is one address where you can go to get 100,000 people off the street."

There is a battle consuming Egypt about the direction of its revolution, and the military council that is now running the country is sending contradictory signals. On Wednesday, the council endorsed a plan to outlaw demonstrations and sit-ins. Then, a few hours later, the public prosecutor announced that the former interior minister and other security officials would be charged in the killings of hundreds during the protests.

Egyptians are searching for signs of clarity in such declarations, hoping to discern the direction of a state led by a secretive military council brought to power by a revolution based on demands for democracy, rule of law and an end to corruption.

"We are all worried," said Amr Koura, 55, a television producer, reflecting the opinions of the secular minority. "The young people have no control of the revolution anymore. It was evident in the last few weeks when you saw a lot of bearded people taking charge. The youth are gone."

The Muslim Brotherhood is also regarded warily by some religious Egyptians, who see it as an elitist, secret society. These suspicions have created potential opportunities for other parties.

About six groups from the ultraconservative Salafist school of Islam have also emerged in the era after President Hosni Mubarak's removal, as well as a party called Al Wassat, intended as a more liberal alternative to the Brotherhood.

In the early stages of the revolution, the Brotherhood was reluctant to join the call for demonstrations. It jumped in only after it was clear that the protest movement had gained traction. Throughout, the Brotherhood kept a low profile, part of a survival instinct honed during decades of repression by the state.

The question at the time was whether the Brotherhood would move to take charge with its superior organizational structure. It now appears that it has.

"The Brotherhood didn't want this revolution; it has never been a revolutionary movement," said Mr. Zarwan of the International Crisis Group. "Now it has happened; they participated cautiously, and they realize they can set their sights higher."

But in these early stages, there is growing evidence of the Brotherhood's rise and the overpowering force of Islam.

When the new prime minister, Essam Sharaf, addressed the crowd in Tahrir Square this month, Mohamed el-Beltagi, a prominent Brotherhood member, stood by his side. A Brotherhood member was also appointed to the committee that drafted amendments to the Constitution.

But the most obvious and consequential example was the recent referendum on the amendments, in the nation's first post-Mubarak balloting. The amendments essentially call for speeding up the election process so that parliamentary contests can be held before September, followed soon after by a presidential race. That expedited calendar is seen as giving an advantage to the Brotherhood and to the remnants of Mr. Mubarak's National Democratic Party, which have established national networks. The next Parliament will oversee drafting a new constitution.

Before the vote, Essam el-Erian, a Brotherhood leader and spokesman, appeared on a popular television show, "The Reality," arguing for the government's position in favor of the proposal. With a record turnout, the vote was hailed as a success. But the "yes" campaign was based largely on a religious appeal: voters were warned that if they did not approve the amendments, Egypt would become a secular state.

"The problem is that our country will be without a religion," read a flier distributed in Cairo by a group calling itself the Egyptian Revolution Society. "This means that the call to the prayer will not be heard anymore like in the case of Switzerland, women will be banned from wearing the hijab like in the case of France," it said, referring to the Muslim

head scarf. “And there will be laws that allow men to get married to men and women to get married to women like in the case of America.”

A banner hung by the Muslim Brotherhood in a square in Alexandria instructed voters that it was their “religious duty” to vote “yes” on the amendments.

In the end, 77.2 percent of those who voted said yes.

This is not to say that the Brotherhood is intent on establishing an Islamic state. From the first days of the protests, Brotherhood leaders proclaimed their dedication to religious tolerance and a democratic and pluralist form of government. They said they would not offer a candidate for president, that they would contest only a bit more than a third of the total seats in Parliament, and that Coptic Christians and women would be welcomed into the political party affiliated with the movement.

None of that has changed, Mr. Erian, the spokesman, said in an interview. “We are keen to spread our ideas and our values,” he said. “We are not keen for power.”

He would not comment on whether the Brotherhood had an arrangement with the military, but he said the will of the people to shift toward Islam spoke for itself and was a sign of Egypt’s emerging democratic values. “Don’t trust the intellectuals, liberals and secularists,” Mr. Erian said. “They are a minor group crying all the time. If they don’t work hard, they have no future.”

But the more secular forces say that what they need is time.

“I worry about going too fast towards elections, that the parties are still weak,” said Nabil Ahmed Helmy, former dean of the Zagazig law school and a member of the National Council for Human Rights. “The only thing left right now is the Muslim Brotherhood. I do think that people are trying to take over the revolution.”

Egypt is still a work in progress. Ola Shahba, 32, a member of a group in the youth coalition behind the protests, said, “After the results of the referendum, we need to be humble.”

The coalition and others have said they see the overwhelming approval of the amendments and the rise of the Brotherhood as worrisome, and as evidence that more liberal forces need to organize in a more effective outreach campaign, and fast.

“Freedom is nice; so is democracy,” said Rifaat Abdul Massih, 39, a construction worker. “But I’m a Christian, and we are a bit worried about the future. I voted ‘no’ to give more time to the secular parties. I don’t want to have the Muslim Brotherhood here right away.”

Poll Finds Egyptians Full of Hope About the Future

April 26, New York Times

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK** and **MONA EL-NAGGAR**

Egyptians are looking forward with extraordinary confidence and enthusiasm to their first free and fair elections this fall after the defining revolution of the Arab spring, according to the first major poll since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. But they remain deeply divided over the role of Islam in their public life.

The poll, conducted by the Pew Research Center and based on face-to-face interviews with 1,000 Egyptians, is the first credible survey since the revolution lifted many restrictions on free expression. It is also the first to directly address Western debate over whether the revolution might drift toward Islamic radicalism.

The poll found about 30 percent of Egyptians have a favorable view of Islamic fundamentalism and about the same number sympathize with its opponents. About a quarter have mixed views.

That range was exemplified by attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood, the previously outlawed Islamist group.

Many in the West have assumed that as the best-organized nongovernmental organization in Egyptian society, the Muslim Brotherhood might quickly dominate Egyptian politics — a view long espoused by the Mubarak government. The poll shows the Muslim Brotherhood is indeed regarded favorably by about three in four Egyptians, receiving very favorable ratings from 37 percent of respondents and somewhat favorable ratings from an additional 38 percent.

But that put the group roughly at a par with the April 6 Movement, a new and relatively secular and progressive youth group that played a leading role in organizing the revolution. Seven in 10 viewed that group favorably, with 38 percent viewing it very favorably and 32 percent viewing it somewhat favorably. The poll's margin of samplinfg error is plus or minus four percentage points.

Only 17 percent of respondents said they would like to see the Muslim Brotherhood lead the next government. Al Ghad, a liberal party led by Ayman Nour, a formerly jailed presidential candidate, was favored to lead the new government by roughly the same number. And one in five supported the New Wafd Party, a secular liberal party that was recognized under Mr. Mubarak.

Nearly two-thirds of Egyptians said civil law should strictly follow the Koran, but then the existing Constitution of Egypt's largely secular state said that it is already based on the Koran.

Sobhi Saleh, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a former parliamentary candidate, dismissed the poll's findings as wildly overstating the support for other parties. Only the Brotherhood has a broad organization and

a well-known platform, he argued, predicting success at the polls. “These findings are wrong, and it’s only a matter of two months until you see that,” he said.

Amr El Shobaki, a political analyst in the Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, said the results reflected an Egyptian habit of shrugging off apparent contradictions between a traditionalist faith and modern lifestyles. “That’s why people can have a favorable impression of the April 6 Movement and like the Brotherhood at the same time,” he said. “Average people enjoy a high degree of reconciliation between Islam and modern ideas. So they are conservative but not extreme.”

The poll also found that a majority of Egyptians, 54 percent, want to annul the 1979 peace treaty with Israel that has been a cornerstone of Egyptian foreign policy and the region’s stability. The finding squares with the overwhelming anecdotal evidence that Egyptians feel Israel has not lived up to its commitments in its treatment of the Palestinians. But more than a third of respondents, 36 percent, favored keeping the treaty, and the poll did not ask the more controversial question of whether Egyptians wanted to sacrifice the three decades of peace they have enjoyed along the border.

Mr. Saleh of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, said he supported maintaining the treaty.

“There is a difference between the people’s feelings toward Israel and their political assessment,” he said “Those who want to maintain the treaty are motivated by Egypt’s interest. It is not because they accept Israel.”

The poll found the military extraordinarily popular, reflecting its decisive role in ultimately pushing Mr. Mubarak aside, and 9 in 10 approved of the work of Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mr. Mubarak’s former defense minister and the current head of the interim military council running the country.

But it was conducted in the two weeks that ended April 7, before recent controversies over the military’s use of force against demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Still, the results may raise concern for Egyptian liberals anxious to see the military relinquish power to civilian authority. Only 27 percent of respondents called that very important.

Among presidential candidates, the poll confirmed the widespread belief that Amr Moussa, the head of the Arab League and a former Mubarak foreign minister, is the front-runner. About 9 in 10 have a favorable view of him, including 41 percent who have a very favorable view. Seven in 10 had a favorable view of Mr. Nour, another candidate known for challenging Mr. Mubarak and going to jail, with 32 percent viewing him very favorably. And 57 percent had a favorable view of Mohamed ElBaradei, a Nobel Prize winner and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency. But many complain that he has spent most of his career outside his native Egypt, and 39 percent of Egyptians reported an unfavorable view of him.

None of the three is considered an Islamist.

Mr. Shobaki, the political analyst, argued that the core of Mr. Moussa's support was the majority who did not participate in the revolution but voted for a constitutional referendum. "These are the people who are looking for stability, want their economic conditions to be improved and do not necessarily want to see drastic changes," Mr. Shobaki said.

The poll found Egyptians remarkably bullish on their revolution and, in its aftermath, their future. Nearly two-thirds said they were satisfied with their country's direction, and 6 in 10 were optimistic about the future. Although open political elections would be a novelty in Egyptian history, most had some degree of faith that they had won democracy. Forty-one percent said a free and fair choice in the next election was very likely, and 43 percent said it was somewhat likely. Only 16 percent said it was unlikely.

Fifty-four percent said a democratic government was worth the risk of political instability, while only 32 percent held the opposite view, the Mubarak government's mantra that stability was more important.

But asked about their most important concerns for the future, the broadest majority — 82 percent — said improving economic conditions was very important; 79 percent said a fair judicial system was; 63 percent said law and order, the same portion that said freedom of speech; and only 55 percent said honest elections.

Slightly fewer, 50 percent, said it was very important for religiously based parties to be able to participate in government.
