GRADUALISM AND ISLAMIST EXPERIENCE IN TUNISIA AND EGYPT

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For moderate Islamists, who refute violence as a political strategy and agree to participate in formal politics, the concept of gradualism (tadarruj) has become a widely utilized term. Operating within a repressive and hostile political environment, Islamist groups embraced the gradualist method so as to safeguard their political and organizational survival. Defined as a reformist method of "the gradual transformation of individual behavior, state and society in line with Islam," gradualism differed from the violent, insurrectionary approach to capture political power. As Islamists did not rush to political power, they espoused a low-profile and avoided confrontational rhetoric. They chose to work within the system, participated in elections, and joined coalitions, even with ideologically divergent groups. Hence, they became acquainted with the ideas of power-sharing, coalition building and political accommodation when they held opposition seats.

Islamists were catapulted to the top of the political system following the Arab uprisings of 2011. Put differently, long-time outlawed or disadvantaged Islamists found themselves at the epicenter

of the political turf. The suddenness of their political ascendancy in actuality contrasted with the essence of gradualism, namely its incrementalist character. Gradualist tactics served the Islamists' interests when they were pushed to the backseat of politics. What happened to the gradualist approach after they finally captured the driver's seat in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings? How did the opening of new opportunity spaces affect their gradualism? Was gradualism merely a tactical choice, one that would be renounced as soon as the quest for political power is complete? Or did it become a crucial reference point for more accommodating and conciliatory politics after taking power?

Al-Nahda's Gradualism: A Success Story?

In an interview given in 1996 to the Turkish newspaper, Yeni Şafak, al-Nahda leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi described the party's political strategy as being "gradualist." Having witnessed the bloody results of Algerian Islamists' rapid inclusionary experience, Ghannouchi opted to assume a more prudent and realistic political strategy. Underlining the necessity of making alliances with secular parties in a transitional period, mainly due to their clout in the media, economy, arts, and the international arena, he stated his willingness to pursue a pluralist political approach. Demonstrating the impossibility of finding solutions to Tunisia's problems by an 'Islamists-only' approach, he urged cooperation with the other parties. "This kind of [power-sharing] is Islamic for us," he offered.

Ghannouchi's approval of Islamists' working within non-Islamic governments and allying with non-Islamist forces is in line with his emphasis on pursuing the higher objectives of Islam [maqasid], such as "commanding good and forbidding evil." In case of insufficient resources and inopportune circumstances for establishing an Islamic state, he felt that there was no harm for the Islamists to cooperate with non-Islamist forces in order to bring justice, satisfy human needs, and prevent the evils of dictatorship. As part of a reformist gradualist strategy, Ghannouchi's al-Nahda, known back then as the MTI (Islamic Tendency Movement), rejected violence, worked for recognition as an opposition party throughout the 1980s, and acted cautiously in calling for an Islamic government. Before calling for such a government, the seniors of the MTI argued that the majority of Tunisians would "want this," which again implied a gradual bottom-up process of Islamization. Arguing that radical change would eventually backfire, as happened in Algeria in the 1990s, Ghannouchi advocated for gradual Islamization. "When Prophet Muhammad's companions' saw an excessive amount of alcohol consumption by the Berbers in North Africa," he said, "they did not start by banning it outright. Islam

had only arrived around year 40 of the Islamic calendar," he added, "but [the Berbers] learned that alcohol was forbidden in year 99."

Similar to the MTI's cooperation with the leftist opposition parties throughout the 1980s to protest the regime's repressive measures, al-Nahda did not hesitate to engage in a dialogue with secular parties after the toppling of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Forming a coalition government with two secular center-left parties, al-Nahda demonstrated its willingness for consensus and power-sharing. Hence, coalition building, advocated by Ghannouchi as an outlet for Tunisia's socio-economic and political problems even before the Arab Spring, was operationalized throughout Tunisia's transition to democracy. Although the transition period was replete with many predicaments, e.g., an ever-growing economic hardship, deepening ideological polarizations, and a rising security dilemma, consensus remained a keyword to rally all parties around the table. Despite the sharpening of ideological schisms in the aftermath of the assassinations of two leftist opposition members, consensual politics, in which civil society as well as political parties became active participants, was not abandoned. The solution to the transitional deadlock between the government and the opposition bloc resulted in the restart of the National Constituent Assembly's stalled works. The creation of a non-partisan interim government and an independent authority to oversee elections were positive results which came out of negotiations. All these developments have so far indicated that al-Nahda's gradualism, in the form of shifting away from self-aggrandizing and espousing conciliatory politics, have proven not to be merely tactical, but rather an essential component of its party ideology.

Al-Nahda's maintenance of consensual politics in the aftermath of coming to power seems to transform the party into being more realpolitik-conscious by diluting the arch principal of political Islam, the establishment of an Islamic state. Arguing that the meaning of shariah in some segments of Tunisian society is intricate and its application might lead to schisms, al-Nahda agreed not to include it in the first article of the constitution. Instead, despite a fierce reaction from the Salafists, al-Nahda sufficed in accepting and keeping Islam as "the religion of the state," as was the case in the 1959 constitution. Stripped of its judicial and legislative aspects, the maintenance of Article 1 does not, however, denote anything other than giving an Islamic cultural coloring to the constitution. Moreover, after much debate throughout the drafting of the constitution, the Islamists' "complementary" emphasis on the position of women vis-à-vis men was changed to "equality," as was finally stated in Article 20 of the new constitution.

Al-Nahda's gradualist method of integrating Islamists into formal politics ended up delineating the line between pro-systemic and anti-systemic Islamists instead of formulating a unified Islamist bloc as was widely feared by secularists. Renouncing the repressive tactics of the old regime, al-Nahda aimed to engage in a dialogue with the Salafists at large. By referring to them as "our sons and daughters," Ghannouchi aimed at convincing the Salafists to participate in formal politics. Participation within the Islamist-friendly new political arena was presented as an effective way to moderate their rigid ideologies. At first, al-Nahda did not formulate a strategy that differentiated between systemic and anti-systemic Salafists. However, this differentiation became inevitable as Salafist Jabhat al-Islah entered the formal political scene by forming a political party, whereas Salafist Ansar al-Sharia refused to renounce violence. As the security dilemma intensified with the assassinations of prominent leftist opposition members, the secular opposition's criticism of al-Nahda's indulgent approach to counter the Salafist threat was augmented. Thus, despite its more lax attitude toward Salafism at the beginning of its tenure, al-Nahda eventually drew the line between different Salafist groups, which resulted in the banning of the anti-systemic Ansar al-Sharia and endorsing the pro-systemic Jabhat al-Islah.

The Muslim Brotherhood: Between Gradualism and Political Power

Renouncing violence in the 1970s, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) adopted a reformist and gradualist path by participating in formal politics. Despite being subjected to persistent regime constraints and electoral engineering, the MB did not abandon a non-violent strategy in order to Islamize individuals, society and the state. Relegation of Islam solely to the individual sphere was rejected and its application in all domains of life, including politics, was seen as a mandatory way to achieve an Islamic order. Political accommodation with the existing political system was adopted by taking advantage of all possible political openings no matter how minimal and restricted. Participation in the electoral game helped the MB evade regime repression, at least to some extent, and maintained the self-preservation of the decades-long organization.

The gradualist strategy enabled the MB to build a coalition with non-Islamist parties for elections and cooperate with the non-Islamist civil society for extra-parliamentary reformist activism. Political accommodation required that the MB avoid denouncing

the regime for lacking an Islamic identity. Instead, the group emphasized the Islamic components of the regime, such as the Article 2 of the Constitution that made the Islamic shariah the only source of legislation in 1980, which in turn legitimized its own political journey. Over time, dialogue with the rest of the anti-regime groups shifted emphasis from its motto, "Islam is the solution," to promoting a "civil state based on Islamic reference." Although the MB demonstrated a more rigid stance on cultural issues and despite some of its identity-based discourse, such as the status of Copts and women's rights, it was more flexible in most political matters, such as agreeing on the compatibility between pluralism, popular sovereignty and Islam.

Despite never being legally recognized by the regime and subjected to unequal terms of electoral competition, the MB's motto was "participation not domination." In a highly-repressive political environment, the only way to ensure its political existence was to develop a prudent strategy. This necessitated the minimization of secular apprehensions, both in the domestic and international arenas, about the Islamists' growing political clout. Not resorting to maximalist political ambitions, in turn, strengthened the group's claims of representing a more moderate version of political Islam. The group continued to pursue a low-profile throughout the Egyptian uprising and after the toppling of the Mubarak regime. Underlining the 'mixed bag' nature of the uprising, its leaders reiterated their decision not to nominate a presidential candidate and seek a parliamentary majority in various platforms. During the three rounds of voting in the parliamentary elections, the MB's Supreme Guide, Mohamed Badie, stated the group's willingness to avoid monopolizing the decision-making processes and their readiness to partner with other political powers to create an inclusive government. In an effort to placate the Islamist-wary sections of society, he denied that the group's ultimate goal was to establish a religious state. The ambition to Islamize Egypt was rejected, since Egypt was "already a Muslim country."

In contrast to its Tunisian counterpart, the MB failed to sustain the strategy of gradualism when it finally achieved executive power, more than 80 years after its establishment. The MB found it difficult to craft a new strategy vis-à-vis sharing power with the rest of the rival political actors. Catapulted from opposition to power, the MB's members found themselves in a new and unfamiliar terrain. Lacking bureaucratic-administrative experience and high-level loyalists within the state apparatus, they had to oversee old regime loyalists in various levels of the state. The MB found it difficult to create an inclusive government and its gradualist approach did

not seem applicable or practicable in a new political context. Its sudden ascendancy to power created an unprecedented opportunity for the MB to retain the long-desired parliamentary power. However, the MB was not as willing to share power with the seculars and liberals, who were similarly adamant in not reconciling with Islamists.

Its success at the ballot box seemed to grant the sufficient mandate to govern the country, as the MB attempted to replace ancien regime loyalists with Brotherhood sympathizers in different state branches, e.g., the state-owned media, judiciary, and provincial governorships, initiating the process of ikhwanization (brotherization) as was labelled by its opponents. In a highly fragile transitional period filled with seemingly insurmountable setbacks and counter-revolutionary forces, compromise and dialogue did not turn out to be the two key instruments in order to solve disputes among rival groups. This represents a clear contrast to the political context in Tunisia, the success of which we can attribute to the continuation of the gradualist strategy. Unlike the MB-in-opposition's patience to compete on equal terms in elections, the MB-in-power seemed hasty in pursuing policies that alienated the revolutionary forces.

Morsi inherited Mubarak's authoritarian structures and tendencies and could not break out of a vicious cycle by utilizing the gradualist strategy. For instance, a very controversial presidential declaration gave Morsi unchecked and sweeping powers to make new decrees free of judicial review. It directly contradicted the MB seniors' promises in the early post-Mubarak era to create a semi-presidential system, which intended to harness the all-powerful position of presidency. With the decree, the judges were denied the ability to dissolve the Constituent Assembly, the upper house of parliament, and the Shura Council, both of which were Islamist-dominated. The friction with the judiciary accelerated with its attempt to regulate a new law changing the retirement age

from 70 to 60 without first negotiating with judges. Resenting this new law, the judges argued that Morsi intended to use vacancies to staff the courts with MB-friendly judges. Moreover, Morsi handpicked an MB-leaning prosecutor-general in the absence of a national consensus, which in turn added more fuel to the opposition bloc. Another crucial arena where national consensus was absent was the drafting of the constitution, which contrasted with the Tunisian case where national consensus was an integral part of the constitution writing process. Despite many walkouts, including liberals, leftists, and the Church, from the Constituent Assembly, the MB and its allies rushed for a referendum without engaging in a national debate, which strengthened the secular claims that the MB's was monopolizing the drafting of the new constitution.

Conclusion

Islamists-in-opposition in both Tunisia and Egypt abided by the gradualist approach but they diverged when it came to the utilization of gradualism when they became Islamists-in-power. Al-Nahda's maintenance of its gradualist strategy, accompanied with the downplaying of its Islamist agenda, generated a more conducive environment for consensual politics to flourish. The MB's at times involuntary relinquishment of its step-by-step method on the other hand, aggravated the already existing ideological rift with the secular bloc and deepened political polarization. In this case, polarization did not work for the MB, as it mobilized and unified its opponents. Having squeezed and cornered the MB into a position whereby it appeared to be trying to monopolize power, the ancien regime came back with its counter-revolution, which was endorsed by alienated segments of the revolutionary and secular forces. The Brotherhood's long-held gradualism seems to have failed to adapt itself to the new political environment, contested by rapidly changing revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces.

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