Michael A. Lange: Political Islam Gaining Ground. The Example of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

In recent years, political groups inspired by Islam progressively made their peace with the characteristics of the democratic order. Their newly-discovered acceptance of elections and parliamentary processes results not least from a gradual democratisation of the formerly authoritarian regimes these groups had fought by terrorist means even in their home countries. The prime example of this development is Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which started out as a charitable social movement and has now become the most powerful political opposition force in Egypt.

Founded in the 1920s, the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest Islamic organisation of the Arab world today. Following the ideas of its founder Al-Banna, it intended to return to a state of 'true Islam', i.e. to return to the way of life of the early Islamic congregation at the time of the Prophet, and to establish a community of social justice. This vision was increasingly viewed as a counterweight to the Western social model that was marked by secularisation, moral decay, and greed. During World War II, the Muslim Brotherhood even founded a secret military arm, whose activities, however, were uncovered, leading to the execution of Mr Al-Banna by Egypt's secret police.

At the time of Mr Nasser, who clearly subordinated religion to the authority of the state, the Muslim Brothers grew more radical. Under the influence of Sayyid Quth, not only the Western states were regarded as enemies but also the 'hypocritical' regimes within the Islamic world itself.

Mr Nasser's successor, Anwar As-Sadat, endeavoured to modify the government's ideological orientation in order to fill the political vacuum left behind by the lost Six-day War. On the one hand, his amendments provided a constitutional safeguard of the primacy of Islam; on the other, his economic liberalism restricted many public social benefits, so that the Muslim Brotherhood with its wide range of social services won new supporters especially among the country's lower classes. However, when Mr Sadat was assassinated by radical Islamists in 1981, the spurious benevolence the regime had shown towards the Muslim Brotherhood came to an end.

At the beginning of the Mubarak era, terrorism worsened again; Islamist groups such as al-Jihad al-Islami and al Jama'a al Islamiyya challenged the state of Egypt. It was not before the 1990s, after many Egyptians had fallen victim to the terror and the initiators had lost their backing, that violence abated. At the same time, the terrorists moved their base of operations abroad to wage *jihad* not only against their "Westernised" home countries but also against the West itself from there – a phase that reached its temporary climax on September 11, 2001.

During that time, the Muslim Brothers cultivated their social engagement on behalf of the weak, thus reaching an ever greater number of citizens. By founding charitable Islamic sub-organisations and financing facilities for the sick, they set a plausible example of their ideal of social justice and Islamic brotherliness. This made them attractive not only to the poorer classes but also and increasingly to the educated middle class and the adolescents, enabling them to rise far enough to become the only political force in the country that can be taken seriously.

In the mid-nineties, the Muslim Brotherhood faced the question of whether or not to assume a parliamentary role, especially as values such as democracy and the rule of law – given the principle of shura and social justice – were seen as perfectly consistent with Islam. Because of their engagement for the socially weak and disadvantaged, people increasingly approved giving a

political role to the Muslim Brothers who regarded Islam and the sharia as their only guidelines in shaping everyday life.

In 1994, the Brotherhood appeared on the political and ideological stage with a reform document which demanded a sweeping reform of the state and society based on the sharia. It called for founding new parties, safeguarding a judiciary that was independent of the executive, ending the state of emergency, separating the leadership of the army and the state, limiting the term of office of the president, establishing an economic order based on Islamic law, and carrying out effective social reforms. The response of the country's leadership was reserved, and others accused the Brothers of attempting to influence the legislature with the paper whose content, they said, was merely a rehash of old ideas. However, the call for reforms earned its authors a new popularity among secular-minded and other Egyptians.

In the run-up to the 2005 presidential election campaign, the national party, the NPD, worked on an answer to the position paper of the Brothers. There was one development especially that gave rise to concern, as it might turn the new movements that supported Western democracy and liberalism into a threat to the regime. To keep the Muslim Brotherhood from thinking about cooperating with these movements, a modus operandi was sought. On the one hand, the plan was to allow the number of oppositional MPs to increase without compromising the party's own power so as to maintain a façade of political plurality to the outside world. On the other, it intended to boost the influence of the 'religious' vis-à-vis the 'secular' elements to reduce to absurdity any Western hopes for a secular alternative to the current regime. Even the Brotherhood itself was interested in the modus operandi as, on the one hand, it meant that its own candidates would be able to operate unchecked for the first time, and on the other, it was an acknowledgement that the Brothers did indeed have their own political reform concept which was accepted by the population.

The government vainly hoped to help its own candidates to success in the run-off against Muslim Brothers with the votes of the secular opposition: The representatives of the government consistently lost against the Brothers in both election rounds. And even after the elections, the strategy of the regime was only partly successful. It did secure its own majority, but the number of the Muslim Brothers now represented in parliament was greater than expected.

The election outcome did little to change the fabric of power in Egypt. However, it did cause surprise abroad, where countries now backed away from supporting secular extra-parliamentary forces and reduced their reform pressure on the government. The success of the Muslim Brotherhood, which also won numerous protest votes, probably means that many Egyptians wish for another, less corrupt policy, but not necessarily one with Islamist traits. It is worth our while to take a look at Iraq and Palestine where, in democratic elections, the citizens clearly voted for their own participation and against corruption among the leadership. However, as Egypt's Muslim Brothers have been unexpectedly successful even in unfree elections, the question is how much the Islamist forces would be strengthened not only in Egypt but also in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, if there were truly free elections there.

Another question is whether the Muslim Brotherhood is willing to exercise pragmatism in its legislative actions and to give up its rigid ideological patterns if it should take on governmental responsibilities. If we take a look at the events in the Palestinian territories, where the Hamas has neither bowed to the political realities nor sought a compromise with the Fatah about policy-making, the sceptics are proved right. This being so, current tendencies in the Middle East are playing into the hands of those who invoke the 'Islamic threat' in the region – a tactic by which they are trying to safeguard their own domestic freedom of action.

And not least, the other countries will have to decide whether and how they wish to support the integration of 'political Islam' into the democratic process of the countries in the Middle East. It should be observed, for example, whether these movements follow the democratic and parliamentarian rules of the game as the regimes they might replace have done. It is not to be expected that, should it assume power, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood would pursue goals that are completely different from those of the Palestinian Hamas. In foreign policy, a government led or influenced by the Muslim Brothers would doubtlessly be a problem for Israel and the West. The obvious approach to a political dialogue with the representatives of 'political Islam' is pragmatic, as it is the only way to find out whether they can offer sustainable approaches to solving the current and future problems of Egypt's society. It is a fact that the representatives of 'political Islam' in Egypt are open to such a dialogue. However, should the West refuse such talks, it cannot expect that Egypt's Muslim Brothers will open up to democracy any faster than they have done so far.