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Post-Islamist Voices in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: The Wasat Initiative

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the complex ideological evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, particularly in the post-1980s era. It explores how the Brotherhood's relationship with party politics, elections, and the concept of pluralism has undergone significant transformations. From its inception, with Hassan al-Banna's rejection of divisive party politics (hizbiyya), to later leaders advocating a plural party system, the Brotherhood's political stance has been anything but static.

The objectives of this paper are threefold. Firstly, it delves into the Brotherhood's shift towards a more moderate stance, driven by a new generation of leaders who emerged in the 1970s and 80s and engaged in syndicate elections. This moderation was a response to the changing political landscape. Secondly, the paper investigates the generational tensions that arose within the Brotherhood. The conflict between the old guard and the new generation leaders culminated in the dissident group's formation, and this internal strife was exacerbated by leadership changes. Thirdly, the paper focuses on the birth and evolution of the Wasat (Center) Party, a dissident group that emerged in 1996, led by figures like Abu Ila Madi, and comprised mostly of former Brotherhood members. The Wasat aimed to be a moderate political party with an Islamic frame of reference, advocating pluralism, social equality, and democratic means of transferring power.

The Wasat's journey is not without its challenges. It faces criticism from traditional Islamist supporters who accuse it of compromising Islamic fundamentals and from secular circles that view it as insincere posturing by Islamists. The paper concludes by exploring the Wasat's position in Egyptian politics and its ongoing struggle to navigate the complex political landscape while upholding its core principles.

KEYWORDS: Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, Post-Islamist, Wasat Initiative.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ideological journey of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been marked by twists and turns, reflecting a complex relationship with party politics, elections, and the concept of pluralism. From the early days of the movement, with Hassan al-Banna's dismissal of divisive party politics (hizbiyya), to later leaders like Omar Tilmisani and Mehdi Akif advocating a plural party system, the Brotherhood's stance on various political issues has been far from static.

In the 1980s, during Hosni Mubarak's rule, the Brotherhood's affiliated members achieved remarkable success in professional association elections, sparking interest in national parliamentary elections. The Brotherhood even formed alliances with secular parties in 1984 and 1987, participating in the national parliament elections. They once again contested heavily rigged polls in 2005.

As a new generation of leaders joined the Brotherhood in the 1970s and 80s and participated in syndicate elections, a noticeable shift toward moderation in the movement's ideology began to emerge. However, this moderate stance did not satisfy younger Brotherhood leaders, who saw the organization as insufficiently moderate in various aspects.

II. GENERATIONAL RIFTS ON MODERATION

Tensions between the old guard and the new generation leaders came to a head in 1996, exacerbated by the unexpected appointment of Mustafa Mashour as General Guide by influential Mamun Hudaiby after Hamid Abu Nasr's death.

Amidst the growing frustration within the ranks of middle-generation leaders, a prominent group, led by engineer Abu Ila Madi, announced the formation of a new moderate Islamist party in 1996: the Wasat (Center) Party. Out of 74 individuals who proposed the formation of the Wasat, 64 were from the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Wasat aimed to be a moderate political party with an Islamic frame of reference, emphasizing pluralism, social equality, and the peaceful transfer of power through democratic means. Its founders included Copts and women, with Madi describing it as "a civic platform based on the Islamic faith, belief in pluralism and the alternation of power."

The Wasat's vision was rooted in three core principles: equal citizenship for both Muslims and non-Muslims, the right of all citizens to hold public positions within the state, and coexistence with other cultures based on respect for cultural differences.

Their interactions with proponents of secular democracy led to the development of common ground. After failing to secure official recognition as a political party, the Wasat was granted permission in 2000 to establish a non-governmental organization known as The Egyptian Society for Culture and Dialogue. This new NGO aimed to contribute to Egypt's progress across various sectors, bolster intellectual diversity, and foster cultural exchange through the organization of seminars, conferences, and the publication of research. Consequently, the Wasat operated as a civil society group rather than a political party under the Mubarak regime. Ultimately, in 2011, during the wave of the Egyptian uprising that resulted in Mubarak's removal from power, the Wasat Party was granted legal status. Remarkably, it became the first political party to receive recognition in the post-Mubarak era.

Drawing inspiration from Islamist parties in countries like Turkey, Yemen, Malaysia, Jordan, and others, the founders of the Wasat Party expressed their unwavering commitment to organizational transparency and accountability. They actively sought recognition to enable their full participation in the political process of Egypt.

The emergence of the Wasat Party signifies a response to disillusionment with conservative Islamism and a strong desire for further moderation in Islamist discourse. This evolution took place even as the Muslim Brotherhood had already undergone significant ideological moderation when the Wasat initiative began. It marked a pivotal moment in the internal dialogue within the Brotherhood, where the entrenched rigidity of the old guard was being challenged by the more adaptable approach of younger members who sought greater inclusivity and democratic pluralism. On another level, it reflects the disenchantment of younger members with the traditional vision of the movement regarding issues such as women's rights, minority entitlements, and political pragmatism. Although not all middle-generation leaders left the Brotherhood, the rebellion by some younger members made it clear that the movement needed internal reform. The birth of the Wasat Party can be attributed to a combination of factors, including disillusionment with the ideological inflexibility of the Brotherhood's senior leadership, exposure to political experiences within professional associations, and the suppression of non-liberal Islamists by the regime. Furthermore, the development of the Wasat's ideology is linked to its continuous engagement with media, civil society groups, secular intellectuals, and intellectuals associated with the "Wasatiyya movement."

According to the Carnegie Endowment, the "Wasatiyya (Centrist) school of thought" represents a liberal interpretive tradition in Islamic thinking rooted in Islamic law but aligned with the values of a liberal democratic system. The intellectual roots of Wasatiyya thought can be traced to the visions of Islamic democracy by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Salim al Awwa's perspectives on civil society, Tareq al Bishri's contributions to judicial equality and Sharia, and Mohammad Umara's reflections on human rights. Although these intellectuals held differing views on Sharia, they shared many common perspectives on minority rights, democracy, citizenship rights for all, the role of women, and democracy. The Wasatiyya thought embraced faith in the democratic system, which upholds individual and collective freedoms and ensures pluralistic elections within the framework of the rule of law.

III. TOWARDS POST-ISLAMISM

The Wasat initiative represents a manifestation of a new awakening among Islamists. While continuing to draw inspiration from the Quran and the Sunnah, they developed fresh interpretations of Islamic texts that emphasized the concepts of pluralism and representative governments. In certain Western contexts, this trend is referred to as liberal Islam, modern Islam, or moderate Islam. In the Arab context, it is known as Wasatiyya or Islamic centrism. The Wasat party positions itself as occupying a centrist position between those advocating a rigid defense of immutable Islamic tradition (conservatives or traditionalists) and those who advocate for the complete abandonment of Islamic tradition in favor of Western institutions and practices (secular modernists).

Some scholars, like Gilles Kepel, analyze the formation of the Wasat from the perspective of post-Islamism. Kepel argues that radical Islam provides the space for its moderate expression, driven by political learning and pragmatism. To broaden their appeal and become more inclusive, moderate groups reinvent themselves as democratic movements. He further contends that due to the failure of both moderate and radical Islamism to effect significant change in Arab states, it is on a path of further moderation. Similarly, Joshua Stacher characterizes the Wasat initiative as a "post-Islamist model of governance." Post-Islamism is marked by a decrease in rigid religiosity and the diminishing centrality of intransigent Islamist doctrines.

The tension within the Brotherhood eventually led to the dissident group's disbandment and the return of some members to the parent organization, while Madi and fifteen other middle-generation leaders resigned from the Brotherhood. The expelled members, apart from those who rejoined the Brotherhood, were also tried and sentenced to prison for petitioning to form a legal political party.

Despite the Wasat's failure to receive legal recognition during the Mubarak regime, it managed to gain support from various quarters, including journalists, writers, and secular intellectuals who saw it as a "moderate and enlightened version of political Islam." The Wasat reached out to secular intellectuals and engaged in civil society initiatives, discussing sensitive issues such as women's status, minority rights, and the role of Sharia in legal codes.

In 2000, the Wasat received permission to establish a non-governmental organization called The Egyptian Society for Culture and Dialogue, focusing on various fields and promoting intellectual pluralism and cultural exchange through seminars, conferences, and research.

The Wasat operated as a civil society group rather than a political party during the Mubarak era. It finally gained legal status in 2011, in the wake of the Egyptian uprising that resulted in Mubarak's ouster. It became the first party to receive recognition in the post-Mubarak era.

The Wasat initiative emerged as a response to growing disillusionment with conservative Islamism and a desire for further moderation of Islamist discourse, even though the Brotherhood had already undergone significant ideological moderation. This internal shift within the Brotherhood highlighted tensions between the old guard's rigid organizational and ideological stances and the more flexible approach of younger members, who sought greater inclusivity and democratic pluralism.

The birth of the Wasat was influenced by various factors, including dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood's senior leadership, exposure to political experiences in professional associations, and the repression of "non-liberal" Islamists by the regime. The Wasat's ideology also drew inspiration from the "Wasatiyya (Centrist) school of thought," a liberal interpretive tradition in Islamic thinking rooted in Islamic law but aligned with the values of a liberal democratic system.

Prominent intellectuals like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Salim al Awwa, Tareq al Bishri, and Mohammad Umara contributed to the development of Wasatiyya thought, which emphasized minority rights, democracy, citizenship rights for all, the role of women, and human rights.

IV. IDEOLOGICAL MODERATION OR INEVITABLE RESPONSE TO STATE REPRESSION?

The Wasat's vision of democracy was founded on principles such as popular sovereignty, separation of powers, universal citizenship rights, political and intellectual pluralism, and respect for human rights. It sought recognition as a political party, with its application being rejected multiple times, leading to legal battles. Some members returned to the Brotherhood, while others resigned.

The Wasat's inclusive approach extended to religious minorities, particularly the Coptic Christian population in Egypt. It viewed Copts as integral to the national identity, not as an external religious minority. The Wasat's Islamism was framed in a way that allowed Copts to join the party, and it included many women as founder members. While the party provided equal opportunities for women's participation, some critics argued that their roles were still confined to traditional family-oriented positions.

The Wasat initiative marked a departure from the traditional Islamist discourse, particularly under repressive regimes. Unlike radical Islamist groups of the 1970s, such as "Islamic Jihad" and the "Society of Muslims," the Wasat demonstrated that under state repression, moderate Islamists could evolve towards greater moderation rather than joining the extreme right. The Wasat leadership's disillusionment with the Brotherhood's confrontational approach toward the regime convinced them that a democratic platform would allow Islamists to operate freely and make them less vulnerable to state repression. The Wasat's ideological moderation also expanded its social base and positioned it as a morally principled alternative to the authoritarian state.

In contrast to the Brotherhood's ideological rigidity, the Wasat embraced a pragmatic approach to politics. While the Muslim Brotherhood identified as political Islamists, the Wasat regarded its members as Islamists who aspired to be politicians. This pragmatism and action-oriented approach mirrored trends among moderate Islamist groups in Turkey, Tunisia, and other places.

Political openings, as witnessed in competitive electoral politics, tend to incentivize Islamist opposition leaders to moderate their strategies. This moderation, according to scholar Rosefsky Wickham, often includes renouncing violence, accepting electoral competition, and mobilizing popular support through party organizations. Essam Sultan and Madi Abu Ayla, two prominent Wasat ideologues, argued that they hadn't abandoned the core principles of Sharia

but had matured and developed their ideas. They aimed to bridge the gap between Islamism and other trends in Egyptian politics, emphasizing: "Islam as a framework" rather than "Islam as a government."

This approach attracted liberals and Egyptian Christians, and the Wasat avoided being labelled as a "liberal" party to avoid association with Western liberalism.

The Wasat's attempt to reconcile moderate Islamism with democracy led to intense debates on various sensitive issues, such as the role of religious leaders, elected representatives, and the public in interpreting Sharia. Disagreements also arose regarding the adaptability of Sharia and the balance between popular will and Sharia.

While the Wasat continues to occupy a marginal position in Egyptian politics, it has influenced rival Islamists, prompting them to moderate their rhetoric on various issues. Moderation has served as a buffer against state repression and allowed for more freedom within the confines of an authoritarian system. However, it has also raised questions about whether moderate Islamism is becoming too similar to secular liberalism and democracy.

The Wasat's initiative has faced criticism from traditional Islamist supporters, who accuse it of compromising Islamic fundamentals, as well as from secular circles that view it as insincere posturing by Islamists. The Wasat, as Madi puts it, finds itself "between two fires," struggling to navigate the challenges of Egypt's political landscape while holding onto its core principles.

V. CONCLUSION

During the 1990s, many Western scholars of Islamism overly focused on the Muslim Brotherhood's alleged intention to establish Sharia as an inflexible medieval tribal order. Consequently, they have expressed skepticism about the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy and have emphasized its supposedly long-term agenda of violence, with insincere democratic overtures. However, a closer examination of the Brotherhood's history reveals that it has never truly had a fair opportunity in democratic elections.

Whether in the context of royal Egypt, post-revolutionary Egypt, or the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, the Islamist movement's attempts to attain power through democratic means were consistently thwarted by authoritarian regimes. This consistent repression only deepened their doubts about the effectiveness of democratic methods. It was this persistent lack of opportunity that led to the emergence of militant factions within the movement. The sidelining of moderate Islamists dealt a blow to genuine democratization efforts in Egypt.

Rather than providing a space for Islamists to engage in the competitive democratic process, successive regimes chose to persecute the Muslim Brotherhood. To counter this repression, the Brotherhood gradually moderated its ideology during the Sadat and Mubarak eras, aiming to accommodate the need for ideological flexibility within the movement and to protect itself from regime crackdowns.

The Brotherhood participated in elections, formed alliances with secular forces, and adhered to civic republican values. However, despite these efforts, the pressure for further moderation continued to mount within the movement. The emergence of the Wasat initiative was a response to the Brotherhood's perceived failure to moderate sufficiently to meet the expectations of younger members. It emerged as a reaction to what it saw as the Brotherhood's rigid ideology and confrontational stance.

The Wasat initiative embraced a more liberal approach to Islamism, broadening the scope for rational and flexible interpretations of Sharia. In doing so, it compelled other Islamist groups to adopt greater moderation in both their ideology and practices to remain relevant in the evolving political landscape.

The Wasat Party's journey reflects the intricate dynamics of moderate Islamism in the face of authoritarian regimes and highlights the delicate balance between ideological moderation and maintaining core principles. Its emergence represents a significant chapter in Egypt's political history, where the quest for moderation and inclusivity continues to shape the landscape of Islamist politics.

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