

ISLAM AND POLITICS IN THE NEW EGYPT

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In the wake of Egypt's revolution, a sea change is undeniably under way: Islam is playing a different and more powerful role in Egyptian public life. But focusing on the growing influence of Islamic forces masks an unpredictable evolution proceeding underneath the surface. The Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and a host of state institutions dedicated to Islam are themselves being reshaped in profound but unpredictable ways by their growing involvement in politics.

Islamic Forces

- The currently dominant Muslim Brotherhood has shown tactical agility in winning electoral victories. But it still needs a clear strategic vision that enables it to change from an opposition social movement dedicated to the reform of all society into a competitive political party.
- Salafis have also enjoyed electoral success despite having much less political experience than the Brotherhood. Yet they must still determine how to combine their unswerving dedication to religious truth with the compromises necessary in democratic politics. And they have to learn how to form disciplined political organizations out of a formerly diffuse leadership of preachers and scholars.
- State religious institutions like the country's premier Sunni center of learning, al-Azhar, have achieved a more prominent role, sometimes enshrined in constitutional text and formal procedure. But the internal and external pressure that comes along with centrality in public life is likely to keep the battles for control of these institutions very much alive. In the end, al-Azhar in particular may find that every step toward increased centrality moves it further away from autonomy.

Underlying Trends

Islamic forces are being reshaped by their participation in politics. The Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and state institutions related to Islam are plunging into the new environment unaware of and unable to control the ways politics will change them.

Egypt is not following Iran's path toward theocracy, but when religion enters the realm of politics it will not remain unchanged. Clerics are not gaining positions of political power, state institutions continue to function, and democratic practices still manage to limp along, though they are increasingly threatened by distrust and polarization.

Religion will undoubtedly play a major part in the new Egypt—though the exact role is unclear. Islamic forces that want to use the power of the state to build a more religious society may one day conclude that they should have wished more carefully.

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