Egypt, Islam, and Party Ideology

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Following the uprising of Early 2011, many have questioned the form a post-Mubarak Egyptian government will take. As a country that is 90% Muslim, one should expect Islam will play an important role in any democratic government that forms in Egypt. If the Mubarak regime can be characterized by restrictions upon political parties, then the period after his fall can be seen as one of expansion for these once repressed actors. With the above in mind, it is necessary to ask what role Islamic parties will play in Egyptian party politics going forward.

This paper will attempt to answer the following research question: What role does Islam play in the formation of political party ideology in Egypt? I expect to find that for parties that identify as Islamic, religion plays a strong role in the formation of their ideology. I also expect to find that the relationship between ideology and religion is dialectical; meaning that while religion can influence ideology, the other aspects of the party ideology can alter the shape religion takes within the party. This study will be important for several reasons: It will allow a better understanding of Egyptian politics following the Arab Spring. Additionally, it will allow a better understanding of not only the role Islam plays in constructing political ideology, but it will provide more general insights about religion in general. Understanding both Egypt and Islam will be important moving forward for interpreting events in all countries affected by the Arab Spring.

**Literature Review**

There is a wide body of literature that addresses the relationship between Islam and politics. While some have expressed concern that here may exist a natural antagonism between Islam and democracy, these concerns are proving to be more and more unfounded as time goes on. Political Islam can be a multifaceted system where a number of different voices can engage the political realm. This interaction can be both violent and non-violent. The most important thing to understand Political Islam is the basic idea that Islam in some way has something to contribute to politics. It is important to note that political Islam is not a monolithic system, but a complex idea that can be interpreted in a number of ways.(Ayoob) This complexity is underscored by the different actors in Egypt that identify with Islam and interpret it in different ways. This turn to religion could be traced to any number of sources, among them are a failure of western secularism and the inherently political nature of Islam.(Black 11) Moreover, Political Islam can tap into both culture and identity. Culture can be used to connect individuals to organizations in a variety of way, with it being used to existing cultural interpretations to bring in supporters that would identify the culture as presented and to create new interpretations to broaden the base of support to those who would not initially join a Islamist movement.(Wald)

While previous research has discussed the intersection between Islam and politics, and additionally specific Islamic parties have been examined, the entire spectrum of political parties within Egypt and their relation to Islam has yet to be thoroughly examined together. Additionally, it is unclear how the fall of Mubarak will affect the relevance of much this research. Some have already speculated that the form Egyptian politics will take will mirror the Iraqi model, but this approach situates religion as merely as one variable amongst many in a broad political system, rather than specifically focusing on religion’s role with the specific party structure. Instead, it is predicted the politics will be fractured, with coalition governments being a necessity while parties form along different ideational lines (al-Rahm 2011). Previous research has focused more on examining particular parties and movements in Egypt rather than the country as a whole. The Muslim Brotherhood has been identified as a conservative Islamic group that may be engaging in more pragmatic politics following the revolution, and is growing in strength following the events of 2011(Wickham 2011, Trager 2011). Beyond the Brotherhood, Al-Wasat, which is a group that spun off from the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990’s, is considered a more moderate Islamic party(Wickham 2004). In recent years, Salafism, which is a more conservative branch of Islam that is closely tied to Saudi Wahhabism in Egypt, has grown in influence. By laying claim to traditional values, Salafism has been able to carve out a growing place in Egyptian politics and society (Gauvain 2010). While some worry about the compatibility of Islam and the democracy, these fears are largely unfounded. The Arab Spring has already upset many preconceived notions about democracy in both the Arab and Muslim world, and there is no single actor within the Muslim world that decides whether to embrace or reject democracy, but instead a multitude from a number of different perspectives(Esposito 2011). Previous research on religious ideology has found that as ideational factors shift, so to do the parties themselves, which indicates that ideological factors such as religion do in fact alter actions and have policy implications (Gill 2001). It is clear that Islam does alter ideology, but the exact affect or way this does occur is not clear. Importantly, previous research centers its analysis of ideology on a historical approach rather than focusing on the role religion plays in the formation of the ideology. Even in cases where research has attempted to study parties strictly along ideological lines, they primarily focused on individual parties rather than Egyptian politics as a whole (Hatina 2005). With all of the above said, it is clear that while a great deal of research has been done on the issues surrounding this paper, a study of political Islam within the party structure is still lacking, which will be especially important in the potential democracy that may form in Egypt.

**Research Methodology**

Four political parties were examined within this study: the Salafi Al-Nour party, the secular Justice Party, the Islamic but still mainstream Freedom and Justice Party that represents the Muslim Brotherhood, and the liberal Islamic party Al-Wasat. These parties provide a broad, if not exhaustive views of role religion plays in various political parties. Coptic Christians make up roughly 10% of the population, which may lead some to ask why a Coptic party was not included in the study. There are two reasons for this: First, the central goal of the paper related to understanding the role Islam plays in political parties, rather than religion more generally (though the finding related to Islam will have general implications for religion). Second, by focusing on parties within a single religion and a secular party as a control, it is possible to provide a more concise and focused analysis. Adding a Coptic party would expand the study too much and distract from the original goals. Studying the Coptic parties is important however, and would be an intriguing extension of the work done within this paper. Additionally, some may worry that the discussion of each party’s history is limited. While this concern is warranted, the goal of this paper is to examine the party’s current ideology, not its evolution over time. Further, since historical development is part of party ideology, and since religion is examined in relation to the broader ideology, party history can still be accounted for. Additionally, much of the historical analysis has been done by previous authors, thus eliminating the need to add to this analysis within this paper.

Data was collected in a number of ways. Secondary sources that discuss the party’s ideology were used. Additional sources that discussed actions or policy stances by the parties during the election were used. These sources include think tanks, news organizations and NGO’s studying events in Egypt and the Middle East. While second hand accounts of the party’s positions were valuable, first hand material, such as each party’s website were used whenever possible. The use of these sources created unforeseen issues. Al-Nour’s website was used, but because it was originally in Arabic, the text was fed through Google translation software. The same method was used on the al-Wasat websites, though in a more limited capacity. The Muslim Brotherhood had an English language website, eliminating the need for a similar procedure. This may alarm some, as the program is not perfect, and even a cursory look at the translation reveals that sentences are often confusing and jumbled. It is important to stress that the translation was not taken word for word, and was used more to capture the general trend or spirit of the text. Only parts of the text that were clear were used, and anything that could potentially be misunderstood was disregarded. Additionally, second hand sources confirm that the reading of the translation used within this paper matches with the party platform and ideology. Lastly, the translation software’s greatest value lied in the citation of Quranic verses, which can be cross checked easily checked and verified for accuracy. By using the various standards and checks listed above, any potential issues relating to the first hand Arabic sources should be resolved, and the sites should be considered reliable and valuable.

Within all the sources references to religion were sought, either as a ceremonial reference of respect or as a direct rationale for the stances taken by the party. Because what could constitute a religious reference is fairly broad, generally only direct mentions of Islam, religion, or god were accepted as religious, and more vague statements relating to morality were not recorded as being explicitly about religion. To further clarify, statements that argued that a policy should be enacted because for a reason tied to Islam or that Islam mandates a particular course of action be taken was counted as being part of a religious ideology, while a statement that merely said a policy should be enacted because it is right, just, or moral was considered as secular.

**Findings**

Each party will be discussed separately, with trends being highlighted in both the findings and analysis sections. The parties will be examined in the order from most conservative to least religious, meaning in the order of Al-Nour, The Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Wasat, and lastly the Justice Party.

As expected, religion is at the heart of Al-Nour’s ideology. Throughout their platform, Islam is continually referenced to, both as a source of legitimacy and as something to be respected. Further, Islam is also used to modify other aspects of the platform, providing an Islamic twist to policies that could function within secular groups.(Al-Nour 2012) A few examples stand out clearly: When explaining the need for a social structure to care for children, the rationale given is that children are due rights and protection within Islam(al-Nour 2012). Further, the argument is made that women are due equal rights within Islam, but they also have a different function to fulfill within society (al-Nour 2012). This interpretation allows for women to be given some rights, but be denied any that may be seen incompatible with Islam. Additionally, al-Nour places a strong emphasis on the social aspect of society, arguing that resolving social issues is a necessary step to resolving additional political problems within Egypt (al-Nour 2012). This has already been partially shown through the party’s policies toward women and children, but protecting the family unit in general is also important, with it being noted that a strong family is at the core of Egypt and Islam, and through a strong family it is possible to resolve both social and economic woes (Al-Nour 2012). One exception to Al-Nour’s commitment to Islam is within foreign policy, where the party is concerned more with protecting its sovereignty and finding a bigger role to play in Africa (Al-Nour 2012)

Beyond social strategy, Al-Nour’s economic policies also have an Islamic foundation. While the actual policies themselves emphasize social justice and the state playing an active role in economic development, one of the rationales for these policies stems from a verse in the Quran: “I have honored the sons of Adam and carried them on land, sea and provided them with good things and preferred them above many of those who created favorable”, which Al-Nour interprets as necessitating protecting Egyptians from poverty and unemployment in the interest of human dignity (Al-Nour 2012)

One intriguing aspect of Al-Nour’s platform is that in its commitment to Islam and traditional culture, Al-Nour is also committed to the preservation of the Arab language and Arab culture in Egypt as a way to preserve the world as it once was (Al-Nour 2012). This represents an intriguing trend throughout Al-Nour’s platform, where Islam is tied into traditional Arab culture and values, rather than merely operating as an independent system of morals and values

The Muslim Brotherhood also incorporates Islam in their ideology. The party slogan best exemplifies the fundamental role Islam plays within the Muslim Brotherhood: “Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Quran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope” (Barsky 2011). Beyond the historical role Islam played in the Brotherhood, following the events of 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood offered an explicit clarification of their ideology. Within this clarification, a number of references to Islam are made, including direct quotes from the Quran justifying the pursuit for liberty and equality (Morsi 2012). Additionally, when outlining the environmental policy of the party, a balance between god’s natural world and the world built by man called for (Morsi 2012). As outlined with Al-Nour, the Muslim Brotherhood also emphasizes the importance of maintaining both an Islamic and Arab identity within Egypt as a means of resolving cultural and social problems (Morsi 2012).

Additionally, even when not advocating themselves for an Islamic ideology, the Brotherhood still attempts to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with various political movements. This is clearly seen by their habit of providing links to articles on their website that articulate positions they support, including a vision of what Islamic women’s activism should look like(Pruzan-Jorgensen 2012). This demonstrates that even when not promoting their own interests or ideology, the party will still attempt to connect Islam with various other movements within Egypt and the Middle East.

The Brotherhood ‘s economic policies are divided into a mixture of capitalist and welfare policies that have no relation to Islam, and those policies dealing with human development that are justified through Quranic verses. Perhaps more interesting than anything, the same verse Al-Nour uses to justify their social welfare policies is used to justify the Muslim Brotherhood’s human development strategies (Freedom and Justice Party). This would indicate a common language of development and justice between the Islamic parties. In this sense, capitalism and privatization can be seen as secular, while welfare and human development have a strong Islamic component.

While the Muslim Brotherhood places Islam at the center of its ideology, organizations that seek a more moderate role have spun off from the Brotherhood, with al-Wasat being one of the most prominent. While al-Wasat has an extremely detailed party platform, the references to Islam are extremely limited (al-Wasat 2009). Al-Wasat’s platform is mostly consistent with liberal democratic values, with the primary difference between a western vision of democracy and al-Wasat’s vision is that the latter utilizes Islam as a justification for those values (Carnegie 2012). It is therefore possible to say that while Al-Wasat does not seek an explicitly Islamic state, they do formulate their views from an “Islamic frame of reference” (Jadaliyya 2011)

Specifically, in terms of economic policy the party’s stances do not immediately reflect Islam since they are not justified by Quranic verses or other aspects of Islam. Having said this, Al-Wasat’s policies strongly resemble Al-Nour strategies that focus on assisting those in the poor and middle class while also supporting the private sector through investment (Carnegie 2012). While a religious rationale is not offered, it is certainly possible that the same verse that justifies the actions of Al-Nour and the Muslim Brotherhood could justify Al-Wasat without explicitly saying so. One indication of Islam’s influence within the party economic can be seen in the commitment to combat poverty through Zakat (alms) institutions (Carnegie 2012). This is of particular importance since the giving of alms is one of the central pillars of Islam, which indicates Al-Wasat’s desire to adhere to teachings of Islam at a basic level. By using institutions that are directly connected to the teachings of Muhammad and the Quran, Al-Wasat is able to use religious teaching to accomplish their goals.

In terms of foreign policy, A-Wasat is mostly secular, with priorities being given to regional issues in Africa, Palestine and the Arab world in general (Carnegie 2012). This mirrors Al-Nour and the Muslim Brotherhood, in that the policies are reflective more of regional concerns than Islamic values. This is not to say that ideational factors did not influence the party’s foreign policy views, but Islam may not be one of those factors.

While many parties within Egypt embrace religion, others follow a more secular ideology. The Justice party is an example of such a party that does not explicitly embrace Islam as part of their ideology. The Justice Party does however embrace religious freedom, but only within civil society, and not politics (Electionnaire 2012). Beyond this, the party platform strongly resembles that of a western democratic party platform(by this I mean a party found in the United States or Western Europe), with stances being taken for free market economics, renewable energy, corruption busting, and a free media (Electionnaire 2012). As one would expect from a secular, Islam does not factor into the formulation of these policies.

The Justice Party’s foreign policy approach resembles those of the religious parties. A commitment to international law, a strong role in the Middle East and the Arab world, and finally a rejection of normalization with Israel are the central components of the party’s strategy (Carnegie 2012). These policies are similar to those of the three religious parties previously examined. This further reinforces the point made above that foreign policies within Egypt lack a significant religious component.

There is little else to say about the Justice Party, as the absence of religion within their ideology makes the majority of their policies and stances only of interest in relation to religious parties.

A final piece of data that relates to the four parties will also be beneficial in analyzing the role Islam plays within ideology. The January parliamentary election will help illustrate the effectiveness of Islam as part of party ideology. In the election, The Freedom and Justice Party, won the most seats with 193, while Al-Nour came in second with 108, Al-Wasat won 8 seats, while the Justice party won 2 seats (Jadaliyya)

**Analysis**

 Islam has a noticeable effect on party ideology. While in areas such as foreign policy the affect of Islam is minimal or nonexistent, domestic policies, particularly within the social realm are heavily affected. Additionally, the mutually constructive relationship discussed earlier in the paper can also be seen in the findings. Each of these issues will be discussed separately and in greater detail.

 In terms of foreign policy, there is little to be said about Islam’s influence. Either directly or indirectly it is difficult to see what affects Islam has. It is possible that Islam in conjunction with other aspects of the party ideology, particularly a commitment to nationalism and Arabism, could have an effect, but even parties that place Islam at the center of their ideology utilize a more pragmatic form of foreign policy. While it is difficult to determine the exact cause of this, but one potential explanation could be that Islamic doctrine was developed before the time of far reaching foreign policies or the existence of a broader international community, thus not allowing for a foreign policy to be outlined within the Quran or by early scholars. Another potential explanation could be that the Quran provides principles for the individual to live by, and while it may be possible to extrapolate those principles into a state domestic policy, formulating a foreign policy based off the way an individual should live is more difficult.

While it has been noted above that religion is absent from foreign policy, it is possible to identify one potential affect that Islam may have. A distinction between the incorporation of international law in secular parties versus religious parties can be drawn. In certain interpretations, Islam may be naturally opposed to international law, while in others it may naturally support the international order. This connection is further reinforced by the Islamic identity being used to reinforce a form of nationalism and the Justice party being the only party that explicitly embraces International Law. The addition of religion adds an additional layer to the dynamic that includes state sovereignty and the international order. Whether religion precedes or succeeds state sovereignty, it adds another level that further de-prioritizes international law and international norms. Additionally, religious ideology can prioritize religion over international. It is easy to imagine an individual or group rejecting the mandates of the international community because they feel it is not compatible with what they believe to be god’s will. On the other side however, a more liberal interpretation of Islam, such as the one used within al-Wasat ideology, could be compatible with international law. Advocating for social justice and human rights could be conducive to a regime that advocates for international law

One of the strongest affects Islam has is on social policy. The three religious parties examined within this paper reveal the various ways this effect can manifest, but all reinforce its existence. As demonstrated by Al-Nour Islam can be used to qualify statements that would otherwise support equal rights. By arguing that Islamic teaching places men and women at different places with in society, it is possible for parties to both affirm women’s rights and also create space for maintaining traditional forms of inequality. Additionally arguing that the family is key to resolving social ills is reflective of The Brotherhood and Al-Nour’s Islamic roots. The above points would support the view that Islam leads to more conservative policies, but it is equally possible for religion to support more liberal policies. As al-Wasat demonstrates, Islam can be used to justify a liberal form of social justice, which mirror’s the Justice Parties strategies. It is therefore possible to say that Islam can be used to justify a number of different policies and approaches.

Along with social policy, economic strategies are also influenced by Islam. All three religious parties utilized Islam in some way within their view on economics. All three parties embrace some form of social welfare, with the Muslim Brotherhood offering a slightly more capitalist approach. As already noted, the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Nour use the same verse from the Quran to justify their policies. This clearly shows that Islam can be used to justify social welfare policies. While Al-Wasat does not use Islam as clearly, they do advocate that Islamic institutions called Zakat’s be used to combat poverty and social ills. We can therefore say that Islam is used to both justify economic policies and to establish alternatives to social ills. One intriguing point that is not resolved is how Islam can justify a strict capitalist approach. If an Islamic party wanted to enact a strict set of policies that favored privatization and trimming social welfare programs, would a rationale exist rooted in Islam? The answer to this question remains unclear, but it is possible that parties that accept Islam are naturally more open to social welfare and public control over the economy.

Additionally, it is possible to say that a dialectical, mutually constructive relationship exists between religion and the rest of party ideology. The exact nature of this relationship is unclear, as a countless number of factors could affect Islam, and vice-versa. Having said this, within the limited scope of this paper it is possible to say that some sort of mutually constructive relationship exists between Islam and the other aspects of party ideology. The best example of this can be seen in the connection between Nationalism, traditionalism and Islam. By linking the two together as being at the core of what is seen as traditional Egypt, traits that make up Nationalism, traditionalism and Islam will bleed into each other. By arguing that promoting traditional values are at the core of a strong Egyptian state, and that part of those traditional values is the teachings of Islam, these links are further reinforced. This is especially true for a party such as Al-Nour, which embraces a traditional form of Islam. Al-Wasat on the other hand does not make as strong a connection due to their embrace of a more liberal form of Islam. This is one of only two strong examples found within the data but the strength of the connections in two of the parties leads me to believe that additionally connections exist but were not revealed in the narrow focus of this paper.

One of the most intriguing trends within Islamic parties is the connection between the Arab and Muslim identity. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Nour note that maintaining and reaffirming both Islam and Arabism as part of the Egyptian identity is important to resolving social and cultural issues. Al-Wasat also takes a similar stand, and in the process argues that there is a unique moral characteristic to the Arab-Islamic Identity. While Islam has roots in the Middle East and among Arab people, it is not true that Islam is inherently Arabic or Arab’s are always Islamic. This implies that the two are linked together by actors in Egypt and the promotion of the two represents a particular kind of nationalism that favors the Islamic political parties. This supports the hypothesis that aspects of the party ideology are mutually constitutive.

Finally, the election results can provide a tangible way to measure the role Islam plays in party formation. As already noted, the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Nour dominated the parliamentary elections in January. While a number of factors could explain this, it is important to not discount the role religion played within the party and its ability to attract supporters. Religion can serve as a natural point of unity to people who don’t have any prior connection. Indeed, even when the Brotherhood was banned, their presence as a religious movement allowed them to perform strongly once legalized. This implies that the religious component of the ideology can transcend the actual party structure and allow for success outside of formal politics.

Some may ask how the above findings can be applied to religion in general. It is true that Islam may have some particular effects that other religions would not, but several general trends can be noted. Religion can have three effects: First, it can alter policies, in that what a religion mandates can inform what they party believes is the right course of action. Second, religion can justify policy decisions. Regardless whether the policy was formulated on religious grounds, the party can offer a religious explanation to appease citizens and gain support from various groups. Finally, religion can be used for symbolic value. This is somewhat similar to the second use, but instead the party discusses religion independently of any policy. Al-Nour best displays this, where Islam or the Quran are discussed as a show of respect rather than in relation to policies. The reasons for this can be to either gain a broader base of support, or because Islam is legitimately at the center of the parties ideology.

 With the all of the above said, it is possible to say that Islam plays a central role in the formulation of Egyptian political parties domestic policies, while the influence on foreign policy is more limited. Additionally, the more conservative and religious a party becomes the greater the symbolic presence it plays. As already mentioned above, the dialectical relationship hypothesized at the outset of this paper has also been confirmed, though the extent of this relationship remains unclear. Additionally, it is clear that there is no single form of Islam, and instead its nature is very dependent upon interpretation. As Al-Nour and Al-Wasat demonstrate, it is possible for different groups to claim to be Islamic and still offer very different policies. With the above in mind, it is possible to generally confirm this paper’s hypothesis and say that Islam does affect party ideology.

**Limitations**

With everything said, there are several limitations to the above research. First, as discussed in the methodology, translations of official party websites were used whenever possible, but since the software was not perfect, it was impossible to draw out all the benefits from these sources. A better translation or an English language website would allow a closer examination of the party platform and compensate for limitations or errors made in the research process. Additionally, the exclusion of Coptic Christians limits the ability to apply the findings of this paper to religion in general. While the paper offers important insights on Islam, and to a limited extent is also insightful in regards to religion overall, by focusing on only one religion, the papers applicability is diminished.

**Conclusion**

 It is clear that Islam does have a strong affect on party ideology within Egypt. Parties which identify themselves or Egypt as Islamic will find various ways to incorporate this identification into their policies and rationales. This paper does a great deal to identify the various ways Islam can manifest itself within party politics. Much can still be said about the role religion plays in politics, but this study adds a great deal to an intriguing body of literature. Future literature can explore other parties in Egypt, and the connection between religion and politics in Egypt more generally, but this paper serves an important step forward in understanding Egypt following the Arab Spring.

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