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DIIS Brief

Muslim youth organisations in Egypt: actors of reform and development?

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Abstract:

In recent years, a new variety of Muslim youth organizations has emerged in Egyptian civil society. They engage in voluntary social welfare activities, but in other ways than traditional welfare organizations. Besides providing traditional charitable services, they strongly propagate a development-oriented approach by offering health and environment awareness campaigns, vocational training programmes and human development courses. Thereby, they assign Islam an important role without applying the language of political Islam, which propagates the establishment of an Islamic state. Instead, they view Islam as instrumental in helping the individual to become an active and useful citizen. In asking the question whether we can observe the rise of new actors of reform and development, this brief gives a short assessment of the potential for reform that these new Muslim youth organizations might present.

Introduction¹

“We have a collective vision of building our society”

When identifying potential forces for reform and development in the Middle East, we should turn our attention to other actors than the explicitly political ones. Furthermore, we must take into consideration organisations in which Islam plays an important role. Usually, Western NGOs and donor agencies search for partners among secular advocacy organisations working within fields such as human rights, democratisation and women’s empowerment. This applies equally to youth, where efforts are often made to mobilise young people to engage more in formal politics. However, in countries such as Egypt, formal political participation is not an option for the vast majority of young people. In addition, the number of advocacy organisations is small and their influence relatively weak. Due to their explicitly secularist approach, they do not enjoy much support among the population in general, nor among young people in particular. Instead, both moral and financial support is given to religiously-oriented organisations working within the field of social welfare, the majority of which have a conventional approach to social welfare, focusing solely on the provision of basic necessities to the poor. Yet more recently, an increasing number of organisations have begun employing longer-term development strategies, as well as involving young people and women in their work. The new Muslim youth organisations represent some of the most interesting cases, among other things because they are addressing a new and relatively influential segment of the population, namely educated and resourceful young people from the upper middle class. In this brief, I take a closer look at these organisations and their reform potential. What activities do they engage in? What are they working for? How do they imagine change and reform? And what is the role of Islam in all this?

Muslim youth organisations in Egypt: an overview

In the last decade, a new group of actors has emerged in Egyptian civil society. An increasing number of especially upper middle class young people have started engaging in voluntary social welfare activities and forming their own organisations. These organisations represent a new phenomenon distinct from other Egyptian youth organisations, as well as from more traditional religious social welfare organisations. They engage in social welfare activities, but in other ways than many traditional social welfare organisations. Moreover, while many other youth organisations have an explicitly secular approach, for these young people Islam plays an important role. Introducing a new approach to Islam and voluntarism, their organisations combine conventional social welfare activities with a focus on human development, as well

¹ This brief is part of a one-year research project on Islam and civil society organisations in Jordan and Egypt, carried out in cooperation with Marie Juul Petersen. The analysis is based on three months of field work in Egypt, including interviews with representatives from civil society organisations, government institutions, universities and newspapers. The project has also produced the DIIS report *Islam and Civil Society: Case Studies from Jordan and Egypt*, available at www.diis.dk.

as activities associated with advocacy and awareness raising aimed at mobilising young people to participate in civil society.

These new youth organisations represent a minor but growing part of Egyptian civil society. They were all established around 2000 or later, and the majority of them started as student initiatives at private and public universities in Cairo. One example is *Resala* (“Message”), which began as a student initiative at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University in 1999. Today, *Resala* is the largest voluntary organisation in the Arab world, with 25 branches and more than 50,000 volunteers. With activities such as orphanages, educational programmes, awareness campaigns and food distribution, *Resala* targets poor and underprivileged people all over Egypt. Compared to *Resala*, most other Muslim youth organisations are much smaller in size and reach, but they have many similarities with this pioneer organisation when it comes to approach, organisation, activities and participants.

Most of these organisations’ activities fall under the category of social welfare, i.e. efforts seeking to provide a minimum level of income, service or other support for disadvantaged people. Although they do engage in traditional charitable activities, such as the provision of food and clothes, they strongly propagate a development-oriented approach to social welfare. Health and environmental awareness campaigns, vocational training programmes, micro-finance activities and human development courses are some of their activities. Generally speaking, these organisations address two segments in society, namely poor families and young people, but most organisations try to direct their efforts towards particularly vulnerable groups, such as women, orphans, students, the disabled or the elderly.

How they are different, and what are they working for?

Unlike many social welfare organisations in Egypt, volunteers constitute the vast majority of participants in the Muslim youth organisations. Furthermore, voluntarism is seen as the right approach to social welfare, because it helps to involve young people in society and at the same time makes activities both more cost-effective and more sincere. The volunteers are all in their 20s or early 30s, and women count for between 65 and 90 per cent of the total number. They are college students or recent graduates from private and public universities in Cairo, and the vast majority belong to the upper middle class. The kind of religion found in these organisations has many similarities with the “Islam light” of the Egyptian lay preacher Amr Khaled, who does not dwell on meticulously detailed rituals and regulations, but focuses instead on how to reconcile Islam with modern life styles. Similarly, making Islam a natural part of their and their target groups’ daily lives is a central concern for the volunteers in these Egyptian youth organisations. In sum, what distinguishes these organisations from more traditional social welfare organisations is their emphasis on voluntarism, their distinct constituency – namely educated upper middle class youth – and their new and somewhat different understanding and application of Islam.

The overall mission of the Muslim youth organisations is twofold, but intertwined. They aim to assist the poor and underprivileged in the Egyptian society, and they wish to engage young people in this process. Apart from poverty-related problems, such as illiteracy, unemployment and illness, participants in the youth organisations see apathy and indifference among the younger generations as one of the major challenges facing the Egyptian society. According to them, young Egyptians are not participating in or contributing to society. Their criticism is especially directed at educated and resourceful young people from the middle and upper classes. By advocating voluntarism and involving especially young people in social welfare activities, they wish to solve both poverty-related problems and problems of apathy and indifference among young people. Thus, what they strive for is both the development of society and the empowerment of themselves and other young people.

Islam, individual empowerment and social development

On a larger scale, those who participate in the Muslim youth organisations wish to contribute to development and change in their country. In this process, Islam should play an important role. Inspired by Amr Khaled, some even aim at a renaissance of the Arab and Muslim worlds, wishing to take part in and contribute to building the foundation of their own future and that of young people in Egypt in general. Although only a few refer directly to Amr Khaled, undoubtedly many of the young people were initially inspired by the ideas and concepts of “faith-based development” formulated in his TV programme *Life Makers* from 2004. According to Amr Khaled, Islam is not only about praying five times a day and dressing the correct way, and *da'wa* (the duty to inform others about Islam) is not simply a call to live by these rules. Islam is about improving yourself and your community, *da'wa* is a call for engagement and social reform.

Nonetheless, the members of these organisations do not envisage change on the structural and political level. There is no desire to engage in formal politics, and there is no talk about the establishment of an Islamic state or the implementation of Islamic law. Instead, they imagine change and development on the level of individuals and local communities. They view their present society as both unjust and ineffective. The main reason for this is that religion is misunderstood. Society does not comply with the instructions laid down in Islam. Therefore, the young people want to inspire others to follow religious instructions. As they see it, everyday life and experiences are not addressed properly by the sheikhs and imams of the religious institutions, and therefore the young Egyptians especially need new religious role models.

One might ask whether this approach to change on the level of individuals and local communities is merely a façade and a result of the strict government control over Egyptian civil society actors in general, and religious organisations in particular. If they were allowed to do so, would these Muslim youth organisations call for structural reforms and a change of government? And would they declare their support for the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamic political actors? Most likely not. Many of my

interviewees were explicitly critical of the present government. Due to their particular socio-economic backgrounds, however, their religiosity and understanding of the relationship between Islam and politics differ sharply from the religious understandings employed by the lower middle class and working class youth. These upper middle class young people were brought up in relatively secular homes more oriented towards the West than towards the Arab and Muslim world. Due to the recent decrease in the power and influence of secular discourses and the growing Islamisation of society, however, many of them have turned to Islam for answers and guidance. But their religiosity is much more individualistic and syncretistic than that practised by the lower classes. Since they have not grown up with particularly religious understandings and practices, they tend to combine Islamic texts and practices with contemporary Western ideas and concepts from fields such as business and management.

For this reason, it is lay preachers like Amr Khaled, not traditional sheikhs or the Muslim Brotherhood, who strongly appeal to these young volunteers. Their religious communication is not so much about rituals and theological doctrines, nor is it the language of political Islam, focusing on the establishment of an Islamic state and society. Instead, for them Islam is primarily about how individuals treat each other and what goals and visions they set for themselves and the society that surrounds them. One example of this new religious communication is the ideal of the so-called “Muslim professional”. Here the practices and strategies of the efficient businessman are seen to complement rather than contradict the values and morals of the good Muslim. A Muslim professional is someone who dresses the right way, works efficiently and has high moral standards. Thus, Islam should be the underlying motivation and what provides general guidelines for the modern individual. If practised the right way, Islam will help the individual achieve his or her goals and become an active and useful citizen.

This new trend in religiosity might, as the social scientist Asef Bayat puts it, signify “a shift from Islamism as a political project to one primarily concerned with personal salvation, ethical salvation, and self-actualisation”. However, some young people – among them the participants in the Muslim youth organisations – use Islam as inspiration and motivation for active engagement in society. Like the majority of young Egyptians, they feel marginalised and excluded from important decisions taken by both the regime and the older generation. They want to find their own role and position in society. Furthermore, they see social problems that neither the state nor initiatives from outside have been able to solve. Inspired by Amr Khaled and others like him, they want to take responsibility for and contribute to the solution of these problems by creating a more just society.

Conclusion

The new Muslim youth organisations are clearly different from the organisations usually involved in partnerships with Western NGOs and donor agencies. Most likely, they even have reservations about cooperating with European and especially North American actors. However, they represent new and potential agents for change and development in Egypt. Acting in an authoritarian and depoliticised

environment, these organisations are actually highly political in nature. Apart from providing services to the poor and underprivileged, they mobilise young people to participate in society and strengthen skills that can be characterised as essential to political engagement –such as techniques of argumentation, team work and critical thinking. But instead of using our vocabulary of democracy, reform and political rights, they talk about participation, social justice and voluntarism, and they do so within a framework of Islam and social welfare. By working within the field of social welfare, the volunteers have chosen one of the few possibilities for participation in actively changing the Egyptian society. And, by using a less politically sensitive language, they avoid the harsh treatment with which the government often acts against civil society organisations more visible on the political arena. Therefore, in discussing the issues of reform and development in Egypt and the Middle East, we should not immediately reject the religious discourse of these organisations, but instead try to understand their implicit political role. Some of them might even turn into important future partners for dialogue and cooperation.

Further reading

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