

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CAIRO WORKSHOPS

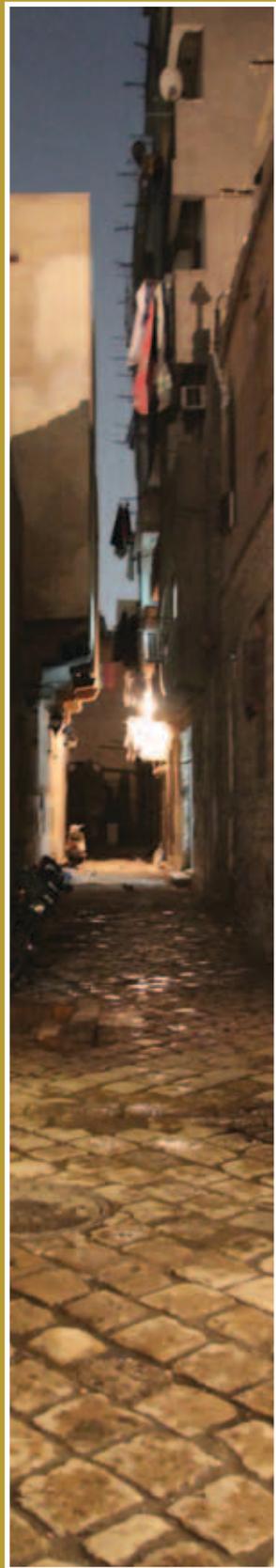
The Cairo Workshops

The Orfalea Center's project on religion in global civil society traveled to Cairo in September, 2011 to gain insights on the role of religion leading up to and following the January 2011 Egyptian revolution. Workshop participants, most of whom took part in the uprisings, agreed that the role of religion in Egypt's emerging democracy remains a critical but still open question. Meetings were held on consecutive days as pro-democracy crowds gathered to demonstrate in nearby Tahrir Square. The first day's meeting was convened by Mark Juergensmeyer and Juan E. Campo, and focused on the historical events, social forces, and mobilizations that led up to the revolution, while the workshop on the second day, co-convened by Paul Amar and Mark Juergensmeyer, highlighted "Youth and Religion in Transitional Egypt: from Tahrir Revolution to Democratic Society," illuminating current religious dynamics and the perspectives of feminist activists.

Day one began with the conveners inviting panelists to share their insights into the changes taking place in Egypt today. Juergensmeyer asked whether the events that have transpired in Egypt over the last year express "simply a transition of power, or is this a change in society and culture?" Campo encouraged comments on how the various religious elements in the society are engaging in the post-revolution political process, and remarked that he remained hopeful about the role of women in the new democracy, given the visibility of women in the Tahrir demonstrations and the expanded leadership positions they now hold in many parts of the country.

Against the specter of an 'Islamist ascent,' the one-million dollar question among apprehensive secular political activists in post-Mubarak Egypt is how to guard the incipient democracy against a possible Islamist takeover.

— Ashraf El Sherif



On the streets in Old Cairo.
(Sidebars, pages 2 and 3. Photo courtesy of Paul Lynch.)

A Balance of Political Weakness in Egyptian Society

Following Hosni Mubarak's ouster, Egypt's transitional political system has exhibited "a balance of weakness" according to Amr Abdelrahman and Ashraf El Sherif. The Supreme Council of the Military Forces (SCMF) lacks the strength to rule legitimately but cannot maintain power democratically, El Sherif explained. On the other hand, while the revolutionary bloc in Egypt is not strong enough to take power, it is strong enough to resist defeat and cannot be contained, repressed, or ignored by the ruling regime. As El Sherif put it, "a temporary but volatile stasis has been reached."

Hijacking the Revolution

Saad Eddin Ibrahim warned of the possibility of the revolution being hijacked by prominent players such as the Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Supreme Military Council and the remnants of the Mubarak regime. Ibrahim reminded the group about historical examples such as the Bolshevik takeover of the Russian revolution and the Islamist appropriation of the Iranian revolution, when Ayatollah Khomeini flew in from Paris just as the Shah was ousted. "So there are precedents of hijacking revolutions, and the Egyptian revolution unfortunately could also be hijacked—and we are doing our best to try to alert everybody of that possibility."

Religious Groups Engaging in Politics as Individuals

Ishak Ibrahim noted that the Copts are an example of a group that was politically cohesive under the Mubarak regime but has fragmented since liberation. "For the first time in modern history, Coptic Egyptians are acting in a manner out of harmony with church leadership." The Coptic community interacted with the Mubarak regime more or less as one organized and relatively contented political constituency that resolved its issues internally before engaging in the political process. In turn, Coptic Church leaders were treated more or less fairly. During and after the revolution, however, many Copts "disobeyed the Church regulations" in order to participate directly in politics.

Egyptian Copts "are protesting on political issues as citizens, they are demonstrating not in front of the church but in front of state institutions, they are approaching the state for solutions to their problems as citizens. They are engaging with national political questions. This is really a very significant development."

— Ishak Ibrahim



Fear Begets Coptic Violence

Saad Ibrahim noted how fear is a pervasive feeling among Copts in post-Mubarak Egypt. This sense of political insecurity has led some Copts to assert themselves in unprecedented and unfortunate ways, including violent ones. While unprecedented in modern Egyptian Coptic history, “in the last seven months we had at least four incidents of Copts using weapons and using violence in acts of gangsterism, and in streets battles with Muslims.” Ibrahim warned that while these incidents may seem relatively insignificant, “actually this is very dangerous because it implies that the Coptic question is on a collision course with the rest of society in the future.”¹

Samah Faried raised questions about the role of Copts in current political dynamics because members were sending mixed messages. The official church implored its followers not to get involved in the revolution, and yet many Copts challenged the Church’s position and participated in the uprising. “Historically,” according to Faried, the Coptic Church “made deals with the old regime to get many benefits.” Ishak Ibrahim affirmed that the Coptic Church has a long history of religious authority and of navigating sectarian governmental policies in Egypt, and thus, the Church’s central position “cannot be undone in a few years.” He continued, “The Copts have twenty to twenty-five percent representation in many of the liberal political parties, including the Democratic Front.”

THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE TELEVISION

Juan E. Campo recounted an example of how the Muslim Brotherhood is using a long established model of community organizing as it attempts to build support in anticipation of the coming elections:

“I heard in Alexandria about a man who led a profligate life as a drug addict and abusive father and husband. He developed a serious problem with diabetes and had to have both legs amputated. Who paid for the operation? The Muslim Brotherhood. Then they offered him and his family a monthly stipend of a thousand pounds, or some amount like that, and gave him money to buy new furnishings for his apartment, including a television set.

The requirement was that if he was going to watch television, he could only watch religious programs. And of course the expectation was that he and his family would now vote for the Muslim Brotherhood candidates, when and if the election should occur.”

¹ Sadly, Ibrahim’s remarks proved divinatorial. One month after the Orfalea Center workshop in Cairo, twenty-six Egyptians, mostly Copts, were killed in sectarian violence exacerbated by the intervention of security forces.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim told of how some of the Islamists with whom he had been imprisoned are now likely to support the secular Egyptian Liberal Party, which was started by a wealthy Coptic businessman. They are doing this, according to Ibrahim, as “one way of vindicating themselves.” Several of these men had obtained law degrees while in prison “and now they have law offices... They were eager to partner with Coptic lawyers as a show of what they called unity.” What makes this so interesting is that these men had been sentenced for fairly violent crimes committed in the name of religion. “So these guys, former violent guys, who were sentenced to anywhere from ten to thirty or twenty years, are now eager to start a new life by partnering with secularists and non-Muslims.”

A Revolution Inspired by Dignity, Energized by the Downtrodden, and Unforeseen by the Experts

On the basis of his own analysis, El Sherif suggested that “the dysfunction of the regime” triggered the revolution, or at least allowed it to occur. “Simply put, the political economy of the regime could no longer function as it used to.” During the several years before the revolution, Egypt “had an unbelievable wave of industrial labor strikes and hunger strikes... mobilizing on the question of karama, dignity, and critiquing the dysfunction within the regime.” Those protests were met with “police brutality and dehumanization of people who didn’t deserve to be [abused].” Official brutality then led to “the emergence and politicization of new social groups and new political actors.” Academics and observers generally under-appreciated the potential of these actors, “especially these social media actors [who] describe our revolution as a revolution of karama, a question of dignity, honor, and respect.”

From Tune Out to Tune In: The Reversal of Islamist Political Strategy

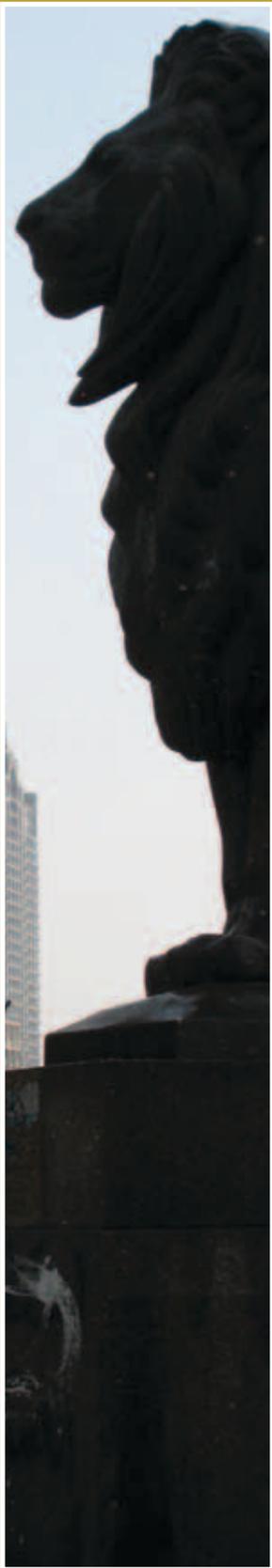
Following the revolution, Islamists, like the rest of Egyptian society, “had to start thinking in different terms or different ways,” according Osama El Mahdy. Suddenly the question for Egyptian Islamists went from how best to isolate yourself from the un-Islamic secular state to how to engage “with the existing power structure, the existing state, in order to bring the application of Islamic Sharia back into effect.” “Islamists will seek to do this,” continued El Mahdy, “through negotiations with the military leadership and other political forces in the country.”



Juan Campo recounting one family’s experience with the outreach programs of the Muslim Brotherhood. Photo courtesy of Paul Lynch.



Pro-democracy graffiti on a wall in downtown Cairo. (Photo courtesy of Victor Faessel.)



Statuary guarding the bridge leading to Tahrir Square. (Photo courtesy of Victor Faessel.)

Political Organizing by... Sports Fans?

Campo made note of some of the associations being mobilized for political expression which would seem novel to a Western observer—in particular, the groups of sports fans who have begun to organize and take part in political demonstrations. “Can you imagine that in the United States? Rams fans, for example... forming a political group in order to demonstrate? Maybe that will happen. Maybe they will take examples from Egypt, who knows? But this is an amazing development. It is chaotic in a way, at least in terms of people who like to think about status quo politics, about organized political parties in certain electoral systems, working themselves out.”

El Sherif sees a very important and historic transformation occurring in Egypt now. “Egypt has been one of the most de-politicized societies in the world, not only in terms of voting and electoral politics, but also in terms of political tastes... the idea of expression, the idea of going out in to the streets and expressing yourself and organizing yourself. We are witnessing a change.” Commenting on the politicization of unexpected segments of society, El Sherif also singled out “the proletariat, young people in the popular neighborhoods, and even the soccer fans. They are creating a tendency of anarchy, and this is new.”

Poor Education as a (Failed) Political Strategy

The most important failure of the Mubarak regime, according to El Sherif, was its failure to provide adequate education. Mubarak intentionally pursued a strategy to freeze Egyptian society in place as much as possible. The regime “utterly lacked any credible political or socioeconomic project,” and it did not even try to cultivate loyal subjects as the Communist dictatorships had. Instead, “there was nothing. Vacant. Wilderness. Bewilderness.” El Sherif believes that this was a strategic miscalculation on Mubarak’s part, because in the end he found himself incapable of countering the cultural shifts brought on by the penetration into society of information technologies.





Pro-democracy demonstrators unite in Tahrir Square.

Undisciplined Masses Energize Revolutionary Impulses

People often cite a lack of leadership as a fundamental weakness of the revolutionary bloc in Egypt. It is true, said El Sherif, that “in politics, if you lack organization [and] leadership, then you cannot really negotiate about politics and you can’t come to power. However, this is [only] a disadvantage in the short-run; in the long run, it’s a kind of advantage. Why? Because it opens the door for some kind of unruliness in the street, in the revolutionary street, and the revolutionary street is uncontrollable,” which gives the masses more leverage to have their demands heard rather than having them constrained and mediated by structures of leadership.

The “unidentifiable and uncontrollable” groups of citizens who energized many of the key moments of the revolution “created a momentum of change and euphoria, a change in the culture of political expression.” El Sherif argued that the emergence of a new “culture of organization, culture of liberation, culture of self-expression, and politicization of very important segments of society is in fact a new kind of politics.” Moreover, he sees an emerging “tendency of anarchy in Egyptian politics,” in which ordinary people are “enjoying the idea of rebelling, of challenging the power structure and the power of authority for no real political agenda.”

NGOs Are the Weakest Link

Abdelrahman made the case that NGOs are the weakest link in the chain of the revolutionary forces: “When you talk about the youth movement, [it] can mobilize in the street. When you talk about the trade unions, they have their own base and the factories. And then the civil departments of the states, when you talk about the political parties, we know their constituency is Islamist. It is the NGOs [that are] the weakest link because [they] don’t have a constituency per se, only beneficiaries. The only thing that NGOs can support are their own battles, or the concerns of their own donors.



Pro-democracy demonstrators in Tahrir Square. (Photo courtesy of Mark Juergensmeyer.)

“It is the struggle within the Islamic paradigm by Muslim women to claim their rights and assert that gender equality is a fundamental part of the notion of justice, which is a main value of the Islamic philosophy.”

— *Fatma Emam*

Patriotism is Driving this Protest

Decades before she ran an academic center largely devoted to the study of Egyptian youth, Barbara Ibrahim was an anti-Vietnam protester back home in America, her native land. She recalled that the 1960's activism “was completely secular, it was totally unpatriotic... we hated our country for what it was doing.” Her research reveals that young Egyptian activists today are much more willing to frame their demands in terms of positively rejuvenating their country rather than revolting against it. “This generation of youth in Egypt—and perhaps also around the world—is expressing a commitment to remaking their country to better reflect democratic ideals.”

The first thing that Barbara Ibrahim noticed in her studies of young Egyptians was “their activism, their idealism; their hopes were very much formed around patriotic visions and commitment to country.” This is in contrast to their parents who were eager to get out of the country as fast as they could to make money.

This same youth generation, which is so concerned with rebuilding its country, uses the 1967 defeat in the war with Israel as a lens to re-examine why Egypt withdrew from its traditions. Why did so many Egyptians leave Islam behind? “Israel,” says Ibrahim, “in an ironic, kind of counterintuitive way, is a role model for young Egyptians who say, look at Israel, look at how strong that country is, because it is a country built on faith. And if you would ask them what about the millions in US military aid, they dismiss that: Israel can defeat us because it is a country built on faith.”

Inserting Islamic Feminism into the Political Process

While the term Islamic feminism was shaped in the 1990's, the movement has evolved through several phases. As explained by Fatma Emam, a researcher for the organization Nazra for Feminist Studies, these phases have sometimes overlapped, and at other times have been distinct. During the scholarly phase, women attempted to critique the scriptures, to rewrite them highlighting the contributions of women and to introduce an “alternative legal discourse.” The networking and NGO phase—not claiming to be Islamic—was based on the idea of pluralism, that any woman affected by Islamic law could be part of the network. In this networking phase, with groups like Women Living Under Muslim Law at the vanguard, women “created a discourse, disseminated information and advocated for gender equality.” Such networking offered a platform for Muslim and non-Muslim women with similar concerns to “launch campaigns” and “create strategic and tactical plans.”

Several areas of contention within the community have arisen in post-Mubarak Egypt, according to Emam. Secular feminists “cannot accept a faith-based feminism, [arguing that] Islamic feminism negates the gains of modernity; more radical voices say that it is impossible to reform religion because it is inherently patriarchal.”

Hind Zaki worried that feminist gains may be undermined in the wake of the January revolution. In January of 2000, “after much deliberation and a rather stormy session, the Egyptian parliament

passed a “Law on Reorganization of Certain Terms and Procedures of Litigation in Personal Status Matters” or Law 1/2000, popularly known as Khul. The Khul law represented a “watershed moment in the history of legal mobilization for women’s rights in Egypt,” according to Zaki. Khul introduced “groundbreaking rights to women seeking divorce in the state family courts,” giving women “the right to seek unilateral divorce by petitioning the courts without having to establish fault on the husband’s part...” This law has proven to be quite controversial. “Most of the controversy centered on whether women have the right to seek divorce through the courts according to Islamic jurisprudence and whether or not, in the case of the husband’s refusal, the court has the jurisdictional power to grant unilateral divorce.” Opponents of the law cited the potential adverse outcomes and the inherent unfairness in the financial settlement, as women incur no financial obligations, thus raising the concern of “women misusing the law to abandon their families and destroying the fabric of Egyptian society...” Proponents of the law generally regarded it as “a major breakthrough that went a long way towards improving women’s marital rights in Egypt.” Zaki voiced concern that the feminist movement may take a step backward in post-revolution Egypt because of several factors, among which is “Islamist thinking that women’s legal gains in recent years are a product of Hosni Mubarak’s pro-Western regime...” Expressing concern that there might be a “conservative social backlash against those laws,” Zaki noted that “the challenge remains how women’s rights activists could insert their demands into the ongoing political process and represent a concrete agenda on the matter.”

Sharing her thoughts on the challenge of the feminist agenda in the political process at Saturday’s workshop, Barbara Ibrahim explained, “Despite women playing leadership roles in the revolution, they have been granted essentially no formal political power in the transitional regime.” Ibrahim noted that every round of political appointments is as bad as the one before, yet she feels that “this will not be all bad because what it has done is rally civil society groups around gender issues. It is no longer the women’s organizations that are the only ones shouting about this. Now you have all the rights-based NGOs joining women’s organizations in public statements, press releases, and protests.”

Religion as a Help and Hindrance to Social Change

In his remarks at the conclusion of the workshop, Mark Juergensmeyer mentioned that the role of religion in the contemporary social and political transition in Egypt is a heightened example of religion’s role around the world in an era of global change. In some cases it aids in bringing about a harmonious social transformation, and in other cases complicates it. In Egypt, there were signs of religious cooperation in Tahrir Square indicating that many of the revolutionary Egyptians were able to rise above sectarian differences and embrace all—be they Islamic Salafis, Sufis, moderate Muslims, or cosmopolitan secularists. Yet the months after the January 2011 uprising have seen problematic moments. There have been vicious attacks on Christians and the insistence on a narrow definition of shariah law that some Islamic Salafis would like to have the new government impose upon society. The role of religion in Egyptian civil society is as diverse as it is elsewhere in the world—at times a force for harmony, at times an agent of harm.

“From the mid 1990s on, Egyptian feminist activists, in close touch with the global feminist movement, found themselves armed with new tools, new resources and a new vocabulary to discuss and frame their demand for more equal rights in the areas of marriage and divorce.”

— Hind Zaki

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ABOUT THE ORFALEA CENTER PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

This workshop summary is one in a series that is part of a Luce Foundation Sponsored initiative on the role of religion and international relations.

The Orfalea Center project will host regional workshops to:

- bring scholars and practitioners together to identify and discuss issues relating to religion that are important in the field;
- develop curriculum and resource materials that will be available as a teaching tool for programs training international NGO leaders;
- infuse the study of religion in the curriculum of UCSB's own graduate program in global and international studies.



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The Luce Foundation's Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs, seeks to deepen American understanding of religion as a critical but often neglected factor in international policy issues.



The Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies at UCSB, inaugurated in the 2005-06 academic year, provides an intellectual and programmatic focus for the University's activities in global, international, and area studies. The Center provides financial support and arrangement facilities to sponsor public programs, seminars, publications, and research planning for units across the campus.