



Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs



Key Issues in Religion
and World Affairs



Carrie Rosefsky Wickham

is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Emory University and author of the recent text *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*. Her work on Islamist movements began in the early 1990s and continues to serve as a role model for scholarship that outlives the debates of the present, helping us transcend secularization and modernization theory. The timelessness of scholarship is why we invited her to present at BU.

public religions, the growing influence of Christian evangelicals in the United States, and the Arab Spring offer fresh challenges to scholars trying to explain the role of religion in modern political life.

The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement

Carrie Rosefsky Wickham

Emory University
October 16, 2013

SEMINAR INTRODUCTION

The BU seminar on “Religion and Power in Transition,” is a yearlong interrogation of methods, theories, and strategies for the reconstruction of the literature on the role of religion and religious ethics in modern political life. In the twenty years since the field of international relations rediscovered religion, scholars have struggled to advance the literature without access to a common paradigm; secularization theory, modernization theory, and the “clash of civilizations” theory are each discredited even while they have not been expelled from course syllabi. Meanwhile, the task of rebuilding is complicated by world events. The attacks of 9/11, Europe’s struggle to accommodate

In this yearlong seminar, we tackle the rebuilding project by bringing in forward-thinking scholars working at the intersection of comparative politics, international relations, anthropology, and religious studies. By addressing the implications of public religions for democracy, humanitarianism, revolution, tolerance, war, and the meaning of core social science concepts like sovereignty, citizenship, and agency, we hope to begin the construction of a path beyond the confusion and impasse that mark much contemporary discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, Muhammad Morsi, a leader in the Muslim Brotherhood, was sworn in as Egypt's first democratically elected president. An Islamist organization that had spent most of its life refused legal status in Egypt was now in charge of the very state institutions once used to repress it. Yet Morsi's tenure was limited in both duration and political impact. As officials of the "deep state" from the Mubarak era have returned to public life, Egypt seems to be returning to a pattern of political struggle and truncated reform hewed long before Morsi's rise to power.

In my book, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, I explicate these struggles by investigating how the participation of Islamist actors in formal politics has impacted their world-views, goals, and organizational practices. While groups like the Muslim Brotherhood entered the political system to change it, I suggest that, paradoxically, they ended up being changed by the system. One of the most striking changes that occurred in the Brotherhood was a growing emphasis on democracy as a legitimate means of governance and on the expansion of public freedoms as the movement's highest immediate priority. This ideological shift raises major questions for scholars of religion and politics: why have Islamist groups come to embrace ideas they once rejected as products of the West and in opposition to Islam itself? What can the evolution of the Brotherhood and other Islamist parties tell us about the possibility for peaceful incorporation of anti-system parties into democratic institutions? More broadly, what does the tangled trajectory of the Brotherhood tell us about the role of religious movements in modern political life?

EVOLUTION OF AN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

These questions prompted me to vet the literature on the evolution of socialist and Christian parties in a very different context: Latin America and Western Europe. Yet, while such studies offered valued insights, they left much to be desired. While Samuel Huntington and others asserted the existence of a causal link between political "participation" and "moderation" of their political ideologies, these concepts were too imprecise to serve as an anchor for my study. Moreover, much of the literature on movement de-radicalization ran slipshod over questions of value change. For example, in the work of Adam Przeworski and

John Sprague, the de-radicalization of socialist parties in Western Europe was depicted as a function of instrumental considerations of party advantage. Little to no attention was paid to the ways participation affected socialist leaders' core values and beliefs. By ignoring the causal effects of participation on party leader's values, I felt that the existing literature was overlooking a major determinant of party behavior.

One of my main findings is that change in Islamist ideas and behavior was part of a process of strategic adaptation, but it also bears the imprint of unconscious changes in Islamist actors' underlying beliefs. It entailed changes in the values and beliefs of some Islamist actors as a function of the new life experiences they gained. Those Islamists that broke out of the insular networks of the Islamist movement and began to interact with other civil and political actors on a regular basis tended to embrace pluralism. Sustained interaction with activists outside Islamist circles transformed how they viewed the world, and persuaded them that the official platforms of the main organizations of the Islamist movement were in need of an overhaul. Moreover, they called on the leaders of Islamist groups to abandon their pattern of self-isolation and cooperate more fully with democracy and human rights activists outside Islamist circles.

The trajectory of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a story of the resilience of the old guard in the face of external and internal challenges. Likewise, and simultaneously, those Islamists whose formative political experiences were in prison and made enormous sacrifices for the Brotherhood were similarly shaped by their experiences. While figures associated with the "reformist" wing of the Islamist movement in Egypt were embraced by secular democracy activists, they never managed to break the monopoly on power held by the old-guard, a clique of veteran leaders in their 70s and 80s who survived the repression of the Nasser era and remained largely encapsulated within the movement's insular networks ever since. It was not the reformists but the old-guard faction, in concert with pragmatic conservatives in the group's new political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party, who have called the shots in the Egyptian Brotherhood since the collapse of the Mubarak regime. Drawing on the constructivist strand of international relations theory, my book suggests that defining organizational preferences in terms of exogenously determined rational self-interest is problematic, as it fails to recognize that religious organizations are often fractured by competing factions with radically different conceptions of the organization's "interests." These cleavages are crucially important for understanding subsequent behavior, and can shape the

“The trajectory of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a story of the resilience of the old guard in the face of external and internal challenges.”

trajectory of democratic transition and consolidation more broadly.

The trajectory of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a story of the resilience of the old guard in the face of external and internal challenges. Among the major achievements of the old guard was its success in cultivating the loyalty of leaders in subsequent cohorts, like Muhammad Morsi. While reformist leaders were holding workshops on democracy and human rights, the conservatives were building a loyal membership base within Brotherhood branch offices around the country.

By contrast, in Tunisia, figures associated with the reformist wing of al-Nahda have shaped the party's agenda since Ben Ali's departure. In Tunisia's Constituent Assembly elections in 2011, al-Nahda obtained 89 of the Assembly's 217 seats. In contrast to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the party's top leaders stressed their desire to govern in coalition with other parties, and indeed al-Nahda formed a coalition government with two secular parties. In addition, the leadership of al-Nahda sought to draft a new constitution with broad national support. Further, al-Nahda promised to expand employment opportunities for women, and was one of the first parties to support the "zipper rule" in elections, requiring the alternation of men and women on party lists.

Yet the progressive policy positions articulated by al-Nahda's senior leadership did not reflect a consensus within the Islamic party at large. Like the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, al-Nahda is an umbrella organization encompassing a wide range of opinion. Where such groups differ is in the power balance among their rival factions. Hence what sets the Tunisian case apart is the dominant

“The Brotherhood emerged from 60 years of authoritarian rule with its organization relatively intact, but its top leaders remained encapsulated within the movement's insular networks.”

position of reformists at the apex of the al-Nahda party.

In sum, the extent to which the reformist impulse took a collective form and achieved broader influence and traction within the Islamist groups under study varied. Such value change occurred first and foremost at the level of individuals and does not clearly aggregate to the organizational level. Indeed, it is differences in the dominance of reformers or conservatives that helps explain

why the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was disinclined to cooperate with other political actors, with devastating effects, while its counterparts in Tunisia exhibited a greater commitment to—and aptitude for—the democratic arts of compromise and coalition-building. In pushing for a quick vote on the draft constitution despite the controversy surrounding it, President Morsi reinforced the

impression that the Brotherhood was its control of the country's highest political office for partisan advantage rather than to serve the interests of society. Why did the Brotherhood adopt the course it did? The Brotherhood emerged from 60 years of authoritarian rule with its organization relatively intact, but its top leaders remained encapsulated within the movement's insular networks. Such characteristics left the group ill-prepared to govern a highly fractious society.

If democracy comes to the Arab world, it will likely be the result of a long process of adjustment prone to outbreaks of open conflict. That said, one of the things which offers some ground for hope is the fact that across the region, mainstream Islamists who once openly rejected democracy as a political system have emerged as some of its most passionate defenders. This does not suggest that Egypt's Islamists have suddenly morphed into liberal democrats. But it lends credence to my argument that the type of political system to which members of the Islamist movement aspire is not a fixed end point but a fluid conception susceptible to revision over time, and will depend as much on competition within the movement as protests against the state and coalitions within civil society.

STUDYING RELIGION AND POWER TODAY

In mainstream political science, description – getting the facts straight – is often discounted as a form of glorified journalism. In that respect, my study offers a rejoinder to the common wisdom. Many of the questions of key interest in comparative politics and international relations cannot be addressed unless important gaps in our knowledge have been filled. Without exploring what goes on within the “black box” of Islamist movements, we cannot understand the implications of political participation for social movement moderation or social movement stasis. In the Egyptian case, the old guard blocked reformers from promoting plural values and cooperation with non-Islamists, and in doing so have helped preclude democratic consolidation in Egypt. In Tunisia, meanwhile, the success of democratic reformers *within the Islamist movement* has shaped the trajectory of the organization and the country's democratic transition. My ability to gather information on these internal struggles hinged on relationships with Islamist leaders that took years to cultivate. As a result, I suggest that it is close range descriptive analysis that enables us to derive valid causal inferences about real world trends that are subject to conflicting interpretations. Description must be the backbone of rigorous social science inquiry, and not a vestigial appendage.

Likewise, the type of knowledge that is built on the basis of secondary source research and cross-national quantitative analysis is just as likely to neglect key determinants of religious movement change as is likely to unearth sound hypotheses. In my study, quantifying existing information or aggregating secondary sources would not have uncovered the endogenous determinants of social movement change and stasis. Despite the surge in the range of statistical techniques available to scholars in recent years, the fact remains that those of us

who study politics must often generate our own data through time-consuming fieldwork and close attention to empirical nuance and detail in addition to undertaking more abstract theorizing. Despite the preference for parsimony in the behavioral social sciences, when we approach important real-world trends, what is needed is greater attention to complexity, not less.