Contemporary Political Ideologies in Egypt .. facts and discussions

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Introduction

What is ideology? It is necessary to define it first before going through more discussions. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, ideology is "a form of social or political philosophy in which practical elements are as prominent as theoretical ones. It is a system of ideas that aspires both to explain the world and to change it."¹

It is also "described through citing principles and tenets advocated and shared by its proponents"² without neglecting the mechanism by which an ideology will be functioned.

The term "ideology", therefore, used at this context means what developed as a set of ideas and associated with practice, action and, furthermore, impact. When it comes to politics, the writer agrees with the definition provided by John Levi Martin in his research titled "what is ideology?" in which he affirms that "political ideology can best be understood as actors' theorization of their own position, and available strategies, in a political field."³

Challenges of the Study

At this regard, this study highlights the contemporary ideologies that have an impact on the political Egyptian arena, if any. The major challenge, however, is that there is no direct or clear criteria or indicator by which one can confidently measure the dominance of a specific ideology. Lack of relevant knowledge is a big barrier! In Egypt, we, for example, do not have a mechanism to routinely measure Egyptians' political ideology. This is completely different in some other countries such as the United States of America where you can easily figure out people's ideological affiliations because there are many supporting tools. We, consequently, can know through a recent study published by Gallup News in January 2017 that 25 % of Americans are liberal while 36 % are conservative⁴.

Some major ideologies can also be known through fair presidential or legislative elections that reflect to which ideology or party people give their confidence. This for instance took place in the 2017 French Presidential election as the founder of "En Marche!" Progressive party won the election with 66.1 % of votes⁵. One therefore

¹ Maurice Cranston, Ideology, Encyclopedia Britannica, see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/ideology-society
concludes that the dominant ideology people support is neither the far right nor the far left, that of opponents, but rather the progressiveness. The case in Egypt is different. The 2014 Egyptian Presidential election was resulted in the winning of the independent candidate with 96.1% of votes. Although the independent winner candidate ran the election with a specific agenda, this agenda cannot be considered as an ideology for two reasons: 1) in terms of timing, ideology has long-term dimension while political agenda is correlated with a specific time for a certain reason, i.e., election purpose; 2) on contrary to political agenda, ideology is convinced by many people not only its founder or holder.

One can’t also consider what prominent intellectuals believe in to be classed as major ideologies in Egypt. Ideologies in a certain country to be considered "major" should have mass patronage on one side and impact on policy makers on the other side.

However and for overcoming such challenges, this paper relies on measuring the success achieved by different political parties in the latest Parliamentary election in 2015, as an indicator of preferable affiliated ideology of voters. The following table includes names of parties, their political ideologies and the seats gained by them:

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6 Luis Martin, why French progressives should vote for Macron, OpenDemocracy, May 1st, 2017, (in): [https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/luis-mart-n/why-french-progressives-should-vote-for-macron](https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/luis-mart-n/why-french-progressives-should-vote-for-macron)


### Facts: political parties' position in the Egyptian Parliament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Political Position</th>
<th>Number of seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Free Egyptians Party (Al Masreeyeen Al-Ahrar)</td>
<td>Liberalism - secularism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nation's Future Party (Mostakbal Watan)</td>
<td>Populism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>New Wafd party (Al Wafd El Gadeed)</td>
<td>Egyptian nationalism - National liberalism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Guards of the Homeland (Homat Al Watan)</td>
<td>Populism</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Republican People's party (El Shaab el Gomhory)</td>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Conference Party</td>
<td>Secularism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>El-Nour</td>
<td>Salafi Islamism - Islamic conservatism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conservative Party</td>
<td>Conservatism</td>
<td>Center-right</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Democratic peace party (El Salam El dimuqrati)</td>
<td>Secularism - Liberal democracy - liberal nationalism</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Modern Egypt Party (Masr Al Haditha)</td>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Egyptian Social Democratic Party</td>
<td>Social Democracy - Social liberalism</td>
<td>Center - left</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Egyptian National Movement (El haraka el Wataneya)</td>
<td>Secularism</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Freedom (Al-Horreya) Party</td>
<td>Liberalism - Big tent</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>My country Egypt (Misr Balady)</td>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Reform and Development Misruna Party</td>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Progressive Nationalist Unionist Party (El Tagamo El Takadomy)</td>
<td>Left-wing nationalism - Democratic socialism - populism</td>
<td>Center-left</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Revolution Party</td>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Free Egyptian Building Party</td>
<td>Islamism</td>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Arab Democratic Nasserist Party</td>
<td>Arabic nationalism Arabic socialism</td>
<td>Left-wing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the formal blog of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 44 parties participated in the elections, 19 of which succeeded in securing seats in Parliament. All in all, the political parties currently in parliament, according to the blog, represent all shades of the political spectrum. For instance, the Islamist Al-Nour won 11 seats, while four leftist parties, namely the Arab Democratic Nasserist Party, El-Tagammu’ (the National Progressive Unionist Party), the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, and the Popular Socialist Alliance won 8 seats, forming a leftist bloc with other left-leaning independent MPs. Predictably, the three center-right parties – all members of the “For the Love of Egypt” alliance – won the largest number of seats, namely the Free Egyptians (65 members), Nation’s Future Party (53 members) and the historic Wafd (33 seats). The new Parliament is therefore more pluralistic than some commentators would have it seem.9

Major political Ideologies

Based on the above, the main political ideologies that will be discussed are liberalism, secularism, Salafi Islamism, social democracy and populism

Liberalism

The word "liberal" derives from the Latin "liber" (meaning "free" or "not a slave"). In everyday use, it means generous and open-minded, as well as free from restraint and from prejudice. Its use as a political term, however, only dates from the early 19th Century.10 Modern liberalism can be tracked to the writings of John Locke, "Two Treatises of Government" in 1689. In his book, Locke emphasizes that human rights of life, health and liberty and independent are considered as natural rights that can't be violated by any human being”

"The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are made to last during His, not one another’s pleasure”.11

In her study "a policy for promoting liberal democracy in Egypt"2006, Dr. Hala Mustafa attributed liberalism in Egypt to the era of Muhammad Ali in the early 19th century. She built her point of view based on the state of Egyptians and rulers at that time.

9 Ahmed Abu Zeid, Egypt's parliamentary elections: setting the record straight, Egypt Ministry of Foreign Affairs Blog, available on: https://mfaegypt.org/2016/01/14/egypts-parliamentary-elections-setting-the-record-straight/
According to Dr. Mustafa, there was "formation of well-educated, open-minded Egyptian elite that embraced the distinctive features of liberalism and contributed to Egypt’s modernization". Liberal figures emphasized the importance of law and order, judicial independence, national (versus tribal or religious) identity, individual and public freedoms, freedom of the press, public education, the rights of women and minorities, pluralism and trade unionism. Dr. Refaat ElSaed referred to liberalism as a political theory that can be considered as an ideology with an essential principle which is freedom is the base of progress. He named Saad Zaghloul and Moustafa ElNahas, leaders of Al Wafd Party, as the founders of liberalism in Egypt.

As discussed above, the main principles of liberalism is personal freedom, liberty and confrontation with any extreme dogma, religious or non-religious one. At this point, liberalism complies with the secularism as will be discussed below.

Secularism

The word "secular" means in Latin "of this world" and is opposite of religious. George Jacob Holyoake is considered the intellectual who created the term secularism. In his book "English Secularism", Holyoake defines secular "is that, the issue of which can be tested by the experience of this life". A secularist is intended to be a reasoned.. one who inquired what a thing is, and not only what it is, but why it is what it is. Paul Kurtz, the leader of secular humanism in the Unites States mentioned that secular refers to "worldly" or "temporal" values in contrast to the "spiritual" or "sacred." He added: "Secularists believe in the separation of church and state in protecting various public institutions of society from religious intrusions."

Compounded it with Humanism, Kurtz declared a statement of principles of the secular humanism as following:

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16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.


20 Ibid, p. 158.
• We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.

• We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.

• We believe that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the advancement of human life.

• We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.

• We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.

• We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.  

In Egypt, first experience of secularism started with the British Occupation (1882 - 1952), the atmosphere which allowed the protection of debate. According to some intellectuals, while it is almost unimaginable that anyone in Egypt now would set up a political party with the name "secular", almost one hundred year ago, the secular party, El-Wafd, as known later, was founded in 1919. It was campaigned under the slogan: "Religion belongs to God, the homeland belongs to everyone." The secular party did not oppose religion as such but objected to the Egyptian king's use of religion to boost his authority.

Both of liberalism and secularism are adopted by the Free Egyptians party. The political ideology of the Conference party is secularism; liberalism is adopted by Republicans' People party.

**Salafi Islamism**

When it comes to present Islamic movements it is very complicated issue. Although they all work under the name of "Islam", they have totally different principles and approaches. Professor Ahmad Moussali, therefore, differentiates these discourses describing them as "discourses created by different and opposing trends in modern Islamic thought… Islamism, fundamentalism, salafism, neo-salafism, Wahhabism,


jihadism, political Islam, Islamic radicalism and others”.

As titled above, focus will be on Salafism as one of the ideologies adopted by a political party, AlNour, that gained reasonable presence in the Parliamentary election, 11 seats. Salafism, according to Dr. AlMaoussli, started as a trend that finds in the concept of al-salaf al-salih (the pious predecessors) the instrument to either understand the true interpretation and practice of Islam or to reject the cumulative experience of the Muslim community. Salafism emerged in a coherent form in the 1300s as a reaction to the rigid institutions and perceived corruption of Islamic faith and practice. From the Arab peninsula, Salafism entered Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century through the movement in the Levant.

All formations of salafism are based on reforming individuals and communities on the basis of returning to the pure Islam of the Qur’an and prophetic Sunna as understood and practiced by al-salaf al-salih. The decision of Egyptian Salafis to form political parties and enter the realm of electoral politics marks a significant departure from the typical Salafi position.

Despite of its apparently Islamic approach, the Salafism's party calls for a civil state where all Egyptians live together without discrimination, far from a theocracy that claims the government rules by God's will.

Social democracy

Social democracy is a political ideology that originally advocated a peaceful evolutionary transition of society from capitalism to socialism using established political processes. Critics of social democracy see it as "an unstable halfway house between Marxism and liberalism. in this view social democrats are socialists without the courage of revolutionary conviction."

On the other side, supporters of social democracy consider the movement as an effort to implement particular policies or uphold certain values… in this view social democrats are basically the champions of the welfare state, ..equality or solidarity.


26 Ibid, p. 11.


28 Ibid, p. 4.

29 Ahmad Maoussalli, Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism, p. 12.

30 Jonathan Brown, p. 4.


See also: http://www.elsyasi.com/civil_detail.aspx?id=56

32 Encyclopedia Britannica, available on: https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-democracy

33 Sheri Berman, Understanding social democracy, Columbia University, New York, p. 3. available on: http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~ces/conferences/left/left_papers/berman.pdf

34 Ibid.
Populism

Populism is the political ideology adopted by the fourth dominated party in the Egyptian Parliament with (18) seats, Homeland defenders. The term "populism" goes back to the farmers' movement of "Grangers" and Greenbackers" in the US in the 1870s - 1890s which resulted in an abortive attempt to from a "third" party in America. In 1892, during the formation of the People's party in the U.S, its activists were searching for a term which would set the new party apart from Democrats and Republicans. David Overmyer coined the term "populism" which rapidly took root. It has influenced modern nationalism in developing countries. Its political nature is based on the "acceptance of principle that the source of authority is in the people."

Conclusion

As it was very challenging to know which ideology to be considered the dominant one, it is more difficult to identify the impact of any of them. Selecting of the political ideologies presented was not because of the great impact achieved by their holders on the ground but rather, as explained before, based on the number of seats they gained in the parliamentary election in 2015!

The first feedback can be given about the programs of political parties believe in such ideologies is that they are almost the same! Despite of the different political ideologies they belong to, there is no distinctive difference in their vision and mission. Moreover, their followers are mostly from the same social class, the elite, not the majority of the people of Egypt. The distance, therefore, between ordinary person and leaders of political parties is so remote. This was not to apply on the banned Muslims Brotherhood and their political party, freedom and justice due to their professional organizing manner and their ultra capacity to reach ordinary man at his home!

When it comes to the ideology formally adopted by the State, the matter will be more obscure! There is no written ideology. The announced one through practices is liberalism. Meanwhile, the executive authority frequently announces protecting poor people through some social solidarity programs, Takaful wa Karama. It means that ideology formally adopted could be social liberalism.

However, there are many points of weakness that can’t be overlooked at this context. How liberalism can comply with heavy-loaded government institutions with bureaucracy? Moreover, how liberalism be applied in a society where civil society associations constrained by a new law that paralyzed its work, law 70 of 2017? On the other side, socialism, even compounded with liberalism, is not compatible with the huge wages disparities in Egypt, not to mention the high percentage of people live under the line of poverty, 27.8%.

35 V. Khoros, P. 9.
37 Ibid.
Hence, to raise a question "what are the major ideologies in Egypt"? Or to be "optimistic" enough and to ask the same question with an addition: "and what are their impact?" leads us to raise more questions rather than giving answers. This imposes inevitable question: "are there true ideologies in Egypt? Or, the era of ideologies has gone forever?!
References:


6) Brain Whitaker, the killing of Islamic secularism, the Guardian, Wednesday April 8, 2009. Available on: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/apr/08/middleeast-islam


14) Sheri Berman, Understanding social democracy, Columbia University, New York, available on: http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~ces/conferences/left/left_papers/berman.pdf

15) V. Khoros, populism: its past, present and future (Moscow: progress Publishers, 1980).