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### **The Muslim Brotherhood's Initiative as a Reform Program: A Critical Review**

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#### *Introduction*

On March 3, 2004, Mr. Mahdi Akef, the leader and guide of the Muslim Brotherhood launched the Brotherhood's Initiative to Participate in Awaited Democratic Reform, presenting the Brotherhood as a political faction that deems itself competent to participate. The Brotherhood presented itself - naturally - in the best possible light, which is everyone's right. And on May 8, 2004, Dr. Essam Aryan, a Brotherhood luminary well known due to his appearances on the local Egyptian satellite station, Dream TV, said this initiative is a comprehensive, complete program for soon converting the Brotherhood into a political party.

Democracy, in its liberal sense, means rule by the people, legislating laws for themselves according to their conditions. It doesn't just mean elections. More importantly, and to lay the foundations for elections, democracy is a pluralistic political system that guarantees citizens' public and private freedoms, especially freedom of expression and opinion. It also guarantees their human rights, especially freedom of religion. These are absolute freedoms, without any limitation or monitoring. The democratic system allows peaceful change of power in society and is based on a separation of powers. The judicial branch, especially, must be totally independent. Democracies adopt the free market economy that is based on competition, and that encourages individual initiatives. Democracies are based on channels of dialogue and peaceful understanding among citizens. In dealing with local and international conflicts, they avoid military options as much as possible. Along with those who believe in democracy, it confronts the mentality of terrorism and violent fundamentalist dogmatism. Democracies oppose absolutist ideas that claim to own the absolute truth, and defend relativistic and pluralistic principles. By doing so, they provide all religions the right to be active safely, except opinions that aim to confiscate freedoms or impose themselves on other parties by force or violence. So democracies are concerned with freeing religion from the monopoly of one interpretation or one sect.

In summary, democracy is a group of regulatory and legal measures for society that humankind has reached after a long history of conflict to refine authorities where religious figures cannot impose their will. Religious authorities were disengaged from the

authorities of the state, to guarantee the state's neutrality toward all religions. This is what allows for freedom of religion and opinion, and freedom of worship for all in total freedom and equality. This prevents conflict in the name of religion, which leads to the security of the state and its citizens.

Despite the fact that everyone present understands these concepts, I mentioned them because they have a lot to do with this paper, which is a critical review of the Brotherhood's initiative as a reform program. One of the noteworthy points the Brotherhood makes in their initiative is: "Comprehensive reform cannot be achieved except by implementing democracy, which we believe in, and whose fundamentals we commit ourselves to... while fully accepting that the people are the source of all authorities." This is a dangerous and serious statement when compared to the attitude of the Brotherhood toward democracy before Sept. 11, 2001. To emphasize the significance of such a statement, let us review some of the statements made by Brotherhood luminaries on their attitude toward democracy. The late leader and guide Mustafa Mashhour said in the party mouthpiece *Al-Da'wa* magazine (January 1981): "Democracy contradicts and wages war on Islam. Whoever calls for democracy means they are raising banners contradicting God's plan and fighting Islam." Ali Quraishi writes in his book, "Modern Islamic Societies": "The rule of the people means equating other deities with God." And Sayed Qutb wrote [in his 1964 book] "Milestones": "Whoever says that legislation is the right of the people is not a Muslim" (p. 162). There are many similar examples, and they all point to the major concession presented by the Brotherhood, when they say they will accept democracy as a principle and esteemed value. But this concession was made under the pressure of major international and domestic changes, and we should make sure it really exists in their initiative. We will not pre-judge them according to their known opposition to democracy on a doctrinaire basis. And we will not ask them why the sudden shift, and whether it has any new justifications in doctrine that were recently discovered, or perhaps a new comprehension of texts that used to mean something else to them. We will just deal with the articles contained in the initiative to be sure of what they are saying, and without asking them to publicly repudiate their prior positions. We will be satisfied with dealing with them along the lines of their new position, and that is what we will study now.

### *Identification*

When speaking democratically about democracy, we first notice the name: Muslim Brotherhood. The name involves dividing people into Muslims and non-Muslims in a country where we would like to remove the category "religion" from the National ID card. This classification of people according to religion makes them either a theocratic group - in which case we don't have a problem with them, because they would have the full right to classify themselves as whatever they want - or a sectarian group, if they want to get involved in politics. In the latter case, they would be a political group with a special status because of their religion, and that they are more Islamic than other political groups. And according to religious logic, the more religious you are, the more right you have to rule the less religious. The name also means that they have chosen themselves for Islam, as opposed to all other Muslims, and this is a confiscation of the rights of all other

Muslims regarding their religion. Also, if we are to consider them a political-religious group, it means diverting religion from its moral and worship goals to become a political ideology for a sectarian group, the Muslim Brotherhood.

In light of their declared desire to establish a political party, the definition of a party is an entity that can include all sectors of society, regardless of creed and religion, including people from all the Christian denominations, and Muslims, whether Sunni, Shiite, Ismaili or Baha'i. It should be designed to be able to include agnostics and atheists, because they are also citizens who enjoy the full rights of citizenship. All are citizens of the state, according to the modern definition of the state, and this is the condition for establishing statehood. None of this is in accordance with the Muslim Brotherhood, because it limits membership to the Muslim brotherhood.

In the second chapter of the Brotherhood's bylaws, they define themselves as: "A universal, Islamic entity working to establish God's religion on Earth... and an Islamic state that executes the laws and teachings of Islam in practice, protecting them domestically and working to spread them internationally... And preparing the nation jihadically to stand united in the face of tyrants, enemies of God, to ultimately establish the guided islamic state." Let's stop here for a moment to try to digest this.

What does it mean when a group that is politically active says it is working to establish God's religion on Earth? That might be fitting for a missionary group that works for a particular religion and feels that it will achieve heavenly award for guiding people to what it considers is better for them. But if this group transforms itself into a political group that seeks power, their attempts at guiding people will turn into hated patronizing and the terrorism of an authority that suppresses the conscience. The holy phenomenon will become exclusive Brotherhood capital. The bigger problem is that the Brotherhood is seeking "to establish an Islamic state that executes the laws and teachings of Islam in practice." That means that the Brotherhood, as a religious party, is not as interested in the values of democracy as it is in the ultimate goal, which is the establishment of the Islamic state. And the qualities of that state differ totally with the modern state. With a religion like Islam, which established a state for the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula, mixing politics with religion, and with the passage of Islamic laws, what the Brotherhood will ask for is exchanging the modern state (and not just winning elections) with an Islamic state. By today's measurements, that would be a total disaster and departure from the civilized world, regressing to the Middle Ages, or a little farther. And if this project is based on God, then God Himself will have to manage it, to avoid confusion among the differing interpretations of His worshippers. Such logic would be accepted, because Muslims are tired of dissension and wars caused by the mixture of politics and religion. Every team will dig in behind God, the Qur'an and the Sunna [Teachings] of the Prophet Muhammad.

It's not wrong for people to dream the jihadi dream of uniting the Muslim lands and rebuilding the guided Caliphate. But the problem here is the ulterior motive. What is declared publically is that the regime of the guided Caliphate is the ideal regime of achieve justice, freedom and democracy. But what is hidden is that the guided Caliphate

was a total theocratic, military dictatorship. In such a state minorities did not have the full right to equal citizenship, and there is no opposition because it would be opposition to God's rule and apostasy. Such is a state where everyone goes back to the texts to look for answers, answers that are ready-made; not practical plans to resolve problems after conducting objective studies, as is done in the modern state.

So, going back to the initiative, let us see where it falls among the two declared positions of the Brotherhood: Is it an initiative that believes in democracy? Or is it an initiative that aims to use democracy to reach the throne and then overturn the state system to rule as they did at the time of the Guided Companions of the Prophet? To give our brothers in the Muslim Brotherhood a chance to be heard, we will ignore their name and definition of themselves, and consider it a thing of the past that can be changed to match their newborn demand for democracy. We will focus only on the initiative.

### *The Initiative*

In its second article, the Brotherhood write in their initiative: "Comprehensive reform is a national, patriotic, Islamic demand... aiming to fulfill the hopes of the nation in living a dignified life and achieving a comprehensive renaissance, freedom, justice, equality and shura [consultation]." Pretty words, but the Brotherhood have special uses for terminology. When they say "the nation," they don't mean the Egyptian nation - people and country - but all sorts of Muslims scattered across the globe. Islam is the nation. Any land that Muslims live in is Islamic land, even if ruled by non-Muslims. If it wasn't as such, what is the use of jihad as a basic necessity to fight the tyrants and God's enemies? The real concept of nation is a modern, social concept, not a religious or language-based concept. The problem is that the Brotherhood's party represents a nation that does not exist in reality, the Islamic nation, because it does not exist in modern terms, nor historically. The reform we are talking about deals with the Egyptian nation. When we are done reforming ourselves, we will think about others, God willing.

Let us continue looking for the points of light in the Brotherhood's reform initiative. We find for the first time in Brotherhood history an affirmation of "the people's freedom of religion... and the right of all followers of recognized heavenly religions to practice their faith." This is new and astonishing and desired. "Affirming freedom of religion" is a basic requirement on the path to democracy, and "freedom of worship for all religions" is also a great requirement and even greater acknowledgement by the Brotherhood. But the problem this article will have with democracy is that it only allows this for "the heavenly religions," according to Islam. All religions consider themselves heavenly, and the Brotherhood require that these religions be "recognized." By whom?! The initiative doesn't say, or perhaps no one stopped to think about who we will seek recognition from. They also didn't to ask, because the recognized heavenly religions are the ones that Islam dictates, according to the interpretation of the Brotherhood, naturally.

So the Brotherhood begin their democratic reform by attacking other religions and their followers, and exiling them, without clarifying to us what other religions besides Islam will be allowed to work. Then the Brotherhood shock us with their standard for enjoying

the rights of citizenship, which is the standard of state recognition, not sect. We find a clear text in the initiative that does not resort to linguistic maneuvering to hear from them where we should start in the reform process. The fourth article states:

"Reform should build upon the foundations of this society... on the basis of guiding mankind to what is right, and enlightening the world with the principles of Islam, which is the ultimate goal of our cause... We are calling for Islam, which is the ultimate goal of our cause. We are calling for Islam, and it is the most guided thought. We present the Qur'an to the world, and it is the most just law... to establish God's law... And it is fair to say that we have departed from Islam... And there is no hope for us to achieve any progress without returning to our religion, executing our laws, adopting modern science and technology, gaining as much knowledge and education as we can, under the fixed principles of our great religion... So we have a specific task: To establish God's rule on the basis of our faith. This is our true and effective way to escape all our internal and foreign problems, whether political, economic, social or cultural... It is by building the Muslim individual, then the Muslim household, and then the Muslim government... To exist for all Muslims everywhere, to protect their dignity and return their lost lands and stolen homelands."

Let's ignore many things here, chief among them the wording, which resonates more as a Friday sermon than a political platform. But let's deal with this passage as the most dangerous in the initiative, because it raises so many questions. Most importantly: If reform is to be based on foundations that already exist in us, why do we need to reform? Why are we backwards and in need of reform anyway? Do we aspire to spread our conditions among other nations, in our call for what is right, which is Islam? Our brothers in the Brotherhood have not noticed that other religions also consider themselves the right religion. They send their missionaries around the world to guide them to what is right, albeit in peaceful forms, and not by force as Hassan Al-Banna preached: "Muslims call people to three options: Islam, paying the non-Muslim tax to the Islamic state, or war" ("Collection of Messages," p. 43). In the same book, he said: "The Qur'an gives the Muslims a mandate over all humankind, and gives them the right to hegemony and sovereignty over the Earth in the service of its noble commandments... Muslims are ordered to spread the message among people through debate and proof; if they refuse, through the sword" (p. 117).

It is strange for the blind to believe they can lead the seeing. He wants to enlighten the world while it is we whose electricity is cut off and live in darkness, backwardness and disgusting ignorance. The same feeling of eliteness and patronism enjoyed by Hassan Al-Banna can be felt in their initiative today, because they are talking amongst themselves and don't see anyone else. To them, Islam is absolutely and without debate the highest form of thinking in the democratic reform program, and whoever doesn't like that can go climb a wall, or wait for the sword.

The Brotherhood are united with God when they say, "We will present the Qur'an to mankind." They should be presenting their man-made political achievements, because the Qur'an is made by God and they don't have a claim to it more than any other Muslim.

And they still talk about "establishing God's rule"?! This is where the initiative becomes a total mystery, because the concept of Islamic law totally collides with rights in the democratic system. In Islamic law, rights don't reflect the people's will, unlike in a democracy. We want reform that has come to us on the winds caused by the collapse of

the World Trade Center, and will not accept that anyone else legislate for us. We want to legislate our own laws, according to our conditions and lives. Islamic law had its moment in history, tied to the message of Islam, geographic location, type of society, and the values of that society. It is not possible to reinstate the great laws of slavery from our heritage, and even sweeter fatwas. And we cannot impose the rules of 23 Qur'anic verses that talk about "women your right hands possess," nor can we enjoy the maids because this is considered ugly rape these days. Also, it is not possible to marry girls at age 9, as Al-Azhar still teaches when it teaches Islamic jurisprudence. There is a lot in our Islamic law that has become outdated by time, taste and human progress. What is left can be considered historic and faith-based lessons and parables, but in the age of democracy cannot spread its magic over us once again.

The brothers in Brotherhood don't see our Christian brothers in our country at all, because they want to establish "the Muslim individual, Muslim household, and Muslim government... to be a government for the Muslim diaspora." What kind of democracy is this? What would they do with the atheists?

What kind of democracy tells us about the value of education, but only "under the fixed principles of our great religion"? Should we accept the knowledge that doesn't shake the fixed principles, and reject any knowledge that doesn't agree with them? Is it knowledge only when it agrees with our fixed principles?

Among the models of reform posited by the initiative are its concern with judicial reform, "to adjust the laws and refine them to fit with the principles of Islamic law," being the major source of legislation according to the second article of the Egyptian Constitution. So the Constitution should never be changed, to preserve this article, and no total revamping of the Constitution to get rid of this article. Of course, executing Islamic law as the law of the land will be immediately followed by public arenas to whip people, cut their hands off, or throw stones at. And we will need to employ a good swordsman to be an efficient executioner, and might as well employ the unemployed with jobs making swords, whips and daggers. You can go on and on with the absurdity of the Brotherhood's democracy.

In the article about media reform, the initiative talks about purifying the airwaves to abide by Islamic law, and this must mean purifying the media from those who oppose the rule of Islam; ie, censorship in its ugliest form. Again, the most obvious aspect of their plan is that they see no one else. They don't see citizens with full rights choosing the life they want to lead, and choosing the media they want to browse, and having the right to listen to music, have a good time, and pursue individual happiness, just as the Brotherhood have the right to be perpetually depressed, without either side bothering the other.

As regards to women, the initiative blathers on forever without giving you anything. It doesn't deal with the issue of women in leadership positions, nor their lesser inheritance (half the male), nor their lesser value as a witness (two women must testify where one man would be acceptable), nor man's right to have four wives (and four maids on top of

them!), even though these issues go to the core of democracy, women's equality with man.

### *Conclusion*

In summation, when the terms of reference are religion, it is impossible to agree upon a temporal program with all the conditions of a heavenly program, unless one opinion suppresses all other opinions, and one understanding oppresses all other understandings. This means the direct result will be dictatorship, without a doubt. It is the democracy summed up by Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi on Al-Jazeera TV: "The democracy I call for is the democracy of Muslim society. It has fixed principles it does not violate, and red lines it cannot violate, and some principles that are not up for discussion" (June 6, 2004).

Thus, and according to the above, I declare that I reject, for now at least, the establishment of religious parties in a multi-religious country like Egypt, under the conditions Egypt lives in. Egypt's awareness has spared it one single Islamic media outlet for the past 33 years. Until this awareness has been restored, and until all horses are running on a level playing field, until then we cannot speak of parties of a religious nature. And I believe that by then, they will cease to exist.