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Egypt's Al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah: Prevailing Through Time

By Zulkifli Mohamed Sultan

Synopsis

The radical transformation of Egypt's al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah is likely to remain a topic of discussion for years to come. Ditching its radical and extreme practices, the Egyptian Islamist movement has thrown itself onto a moderate and supple path. The group's unexpected transformation has taken many people by surprise.

Commentary

EGYPT'S REVOLUTION, with its mass protests, strikes and demands for democratic reform, has gained the world's attention due to the unique involvement of activists and political groups from various backgrounds. Although al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah did not play a major role in the Tahrir Square uprising last year, it has managed to submerge itself in the chaotic events and quietly outshone other political parties in gaining the Egyptian people's support and trust. The removal of Hosni Mubarak from the presidency has paved the way for Islamist groups such as al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah to express themselves through politics and democratic means.

Successful entry into Egyptian politics

As the revolution progressed, al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah entered the political fray by establishing a political group called Hizb al-Binaa' Wa al-Tanmiyah (Building and Development Party). It marked a sharp turn from "quietism" to active political engagement - in effect the group is heading towards the Muslim Brotherhood's customary political sphere. The party was founded subsequent to the January 2011 uprising by the well-known and former prominent jihadist figure Tareq al-Zumr, who spent almost 30 years in prison for instigating Sadat's assassination. It is considered to be the al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah's key arm in Egypt's political arena and is a part of the Islamic Alliance operating in the parliamentary and Syura Council selections.

Hizb al-Binaa' Wa al-Tanmiyah later contested in the 2011-2012 elections under the umbrella of the Islamic Alliance which was spearheaded by al-Nour Party where it gained 13 seats in the People's Council in the lower house of the Egyptian parliament. The Islamic Alliance expects to have strong support countrywide, with each party in the grouping enjoying widespread support in different parts of Egypt.

One of the party's positive aims is to spread the values and principles of political Islam and attain social equality that will maintain the minimum standard of a decent life - by providing necessities such as food, medical insurance, education and humanitarian accommodation. The party further stressed the use of Islamic law in

society in the future, although they gave assurances for the protection of minority rights and individual freedom. The party tends to accommodate as many views as possible to widen its public appeal.

Ideological revisions

After the murder of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, the Egyptian government arrested hundreds of al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah members and uprooted its infrastructure throughout Egypt. Jailed al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah leaders went through torture. Prominent Muslim scholars from the well-known Al-Azhar University were sent by the Egyptian government to engage in intellectual exchanges with the imprisoned al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah leaders. Years of debate with such religious figures seem to have finally borne fruit, motivating the leaders to review their literature. In fact, the group has renounced violence completely.

It has been nearly two decades since the Egyptian government waged a bitter campaign of state violence, mass arrests and financial crackdowns on the al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah. Egyptians will never forget the horrifying incidents of attacks by the group when they engaged in armed confrontations with security forces during the 1990s in an attempt to overthrow the regime and establish a caliphate.

Since the ideological revisions, the group's non-violence initiative has taken a step further by promoting moderation and better relations with the government. Al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah has since renewed the religious discourse and developed good ties with Egyptian Christians. They have even gone to the extent of addressing sectarian and religious issues and affirmed that freedom of belief and practice will be given to all. It has also redefined the concept of jihad which led the group to conclude that, "Jihad is neither the goal nor the intent. Jihad is the way to raise the banner of religion and God's Word. And if Jihad can't achieve that, it is forbidden." Its leaders announced several years ago that they had abandoned jihadist ideas and apologised for their attacks, which led to the deaths of hundreds of innocent people.

A transformation of this scale is likely to have a colossal impact on the landscape of Islamic movements in Egypt and abroad. The revision has turned al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah into a group that is more moderate than any on the Islamist landscape in Egypt, including the Salafi groups. The revisions could even propel al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah as the main contender to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the country's largest moderate political Islam group.

Future implications

As Egypt approaches a critical point in its political evolution, the tug-of-war between different political groups is pervasive. At the core, a critical question arises: can a former jihadist group like al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah address the country's political, economic and social concerns with integrity?

Although the group has been largely successful in its effort to gain the trust of the Egyptian people, it still faces enormous pressure to reintegrate itself with other Islamist groups and secularists in Egypt who have divergent visions of the future and even view each other with mistrust.

If the al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyah manages to come up with a work plan to match its new approach to political life following its doctrinal revision, it may just have a future as a political player of considerable weight in Egypt's post-Mubarak political arena.

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