Title: Does Revolutionary Politics Reconfigure Islamist Women's Agency Organizationally? The Case of the Muslim Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928-2013)

More details/abstract

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Version: Version of record

Does revolutionary politics reconfigure Islamist[1] women's agency organizationally? The case of the Muslim Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928-2013)

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Abstract

For the first time in eighty years, one of the oldest and most important religious movements striving to establish an Islamic state, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt reached the apex of political power between 2011-2013, after decades of containment and sometimes repression. Against this backdrop this paper explores how the dramatic power reconfigurations associated with the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and its aftermath impacted on the agency of the Muslim Sisters belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood both internally within the organization and in terms of their public roles. The paper is based on empirical data collected between 2007-2012 and complemented with secondary literature both in Arabic and English. The paper aims to make a contribution to understanding the extent to which political empowerment of women and men in Islamist movements affects internal gender hierarchies through a historicized and contextualized approach.

Keywords: Muslim Sisters, Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt, Islamic women, agency

Introduction

Despite the rich scholarship in English on the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a paucity of research exclusively focused on the Muslim Sisters. The Muslim Sisters however, have historically played a central role in the

growth of the Muslim Brothers in terms of community outreach, recruitment and mobilization. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the very survival of the Muslim Brothers rested on the role of the Muslim Sisters in preventing the movement from complete obliteration in the 1950s and 1960s and then again in providing the resilience, resistance and resourcefulness when the movement faced a systematic crackdown from the government in 2013 onwards. The political successes of the Muslim Brothers in particular in the elections of 2005 and 2011 have been attributed to the mass mobilization of the women's agency of the Muslim Brothers.

This paper seeks to examine the agency of the Muslim Sisters in a contextualized and historicized manner with a particular focus on the question of whether the reconfiguration of power dynamics generated by the Egyptian revolution of 2011 influenced the gender hierarchy within the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement up to 2013. While a related topic, due to space limitations, the paper does not discuss the gender policies championed by the Muslim Brotherhood or women's own ideological standpoints on the themes of gender equality.

The paper is organized as follows: following this introduction which discusses the definitional and methodological approach, its limitations as well as writer's own positionality and standpoint; the second part discusses the conceptual contestations around the Muslim Sisters in relation to both authoritarianism and piety movements. These will be revisited in the conclusion. The second part historicizes the Muslim Sisters and their organizational positioning. The third part discusses the agency of the Muslim Sisters in and out of the movement between 2012-2013.

Navigating definitional complexity and methodological dilemmas

It may be worthwhile to commence with a definition of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest religious movement with a vision to institutionalize Islamic governance (Shariah, Islamic canonical law])

through a modern state system. Hassan el Banna the founder who established the movement in 1928 provided the most comprehensive, holistic definition of the Muslim Brothers:

A Salafi[2] call (da'wa): because they call for returning Islam to its purist meaning from God's Book and the Sunnah of his Prophet

A Sunni way (tariqa): because they take it upon themselves to work according to the pure Sunna in all things especially in beliefs, 'badat, whenever they find a way for that

A Sufi truth: because they know the essence of goodness is purity of soul and purity of heart and persistence in work [……]

A political entity: because they call for the reform of internal government, and the revision of the Islamic Ummah[3]'s relations with other nations [….]

A sports group: because they care about their bodies and believe that a strong believer is better than a weak one [………]

A scientific, cultural solidarity: because Islam makes the quest for knowledge a fareeda(ordinance from God) for every Muslim man and woman and because the Muslim Brotherhood clubs are in reality schools for education and enculturation and institutes for pedagogy for the body, mind and spirit.

A commercial company […]

A social idea: because they are concerned with the ills of Islamic society and they try to reach ways of remedying and healing the Ummah from them

(Amin 2006).

This all-encompassing nature of the movement as envisaged by Hassan el Banna reflects the thinking, planning, organizing around every array of political, economic and social life that represents the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood. However, a holistic vision does not mean a

homogeneous entity. The Muslim Brotherhood, being a large and complex movement, is one that comprises a number of ideological standpoints, along the spectrum of a reformist agenda on one end of the spectrum (for example in the person of Essam el Erian) to a Salafi agenda on the other (Mohamed el Khateeb, the former Mufti of the movement). It is also one of a number of struggles, first between the Old Guard, who represent the rule of the gerontocracy and the younger generations who have been on the fringes of the decision-making apparatus within the movement. While the Muslim Brotherhood has at its inception had strong links with the Wahabi-Salafi ideology[4], there has also been a steady process of the Salafization[5] of the Brotherhood occurring over the past fifty years, and which has been accentuated by the migration to Gulf countries (Tammam 2010, Abdel-Latif 2008).

The Muslim Brotherhood highly sophisticated institutional pyramidal structure has survived and evolved over more than 80 years, with clear lines of command and division of labour. At the top of the pyramid is the Supreme Guide, the leader, and under him the Guidance Bureau, 'the power house of the movement'. The Shura Council elect members of the Guidance Bureau. Organizationally, the country is divided into administrative offices which plan and implement the work of the Brothers[6].

The Muslim Brothers is also a highly dynamic movement that has affiliate movements worldwide, extending from Gaza to Jordan to Pakistan to Turkey to Indonesia. Its international base is in the UK. When examining the positioning of the Muslim Sisters in the Muslim Brotherhood, it would be highly limiting to adopt an institutional approach that does not examine the broader political, economic and social context in which the movement engages. The period in question (2011-2013) was politically highly volatile, and how members interpreted the opportunities and challenges facing them and the movement varied. Accordingly, the empirical research sought to capture the multivocality of the Muslim Brotherhood through

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interviews with a wide array of individuals across age, gender, ideological orientation, position within the movement/party. Two interviews were also held with members who have defected from the Brothers post-2011. A number of interviews were conducted in 2006 and more interviews were undertaken in 2012[7], the latter being an exceptionally opportune moment to interview Muslim Brothers and Sisters because they were at the historic apex of their power. Where deemed appropriate, the interviews have been anonymised to protect their identities.

The interviews were complemented with an analysis of autobiographies of Muslim Sisters, of a historical as well as contemporary nature, of loyalists as well as defectors. These autobiographies were critically important because the narratives revealed a great deal about the power dynamics within the movement. The autobiography of Zeinab el Ghazali the spiritual Godmother of the Muslim Sisters is perhaps the most renowned, however other autobiographies consulted include that of Fatma Abd el Hady, a teacher who joined the Brothers in 1942, and became one of the 12 committee members that revived Muslim Sisters division in the 1940s. It also draws on autobiographies of defectors such as Intesar Abdel Moneim's account (2011).

As the Muslim Brotherhood are prolific in their writings, the research drew on scholarship written by members themselves[8]. Much credit is due to Gomaa Amin, a long standing member of the Guidance Bureau and the Muslim Brother's historian par excellence who compiled the writings of Hassan el Banna and the Brothers from the time of their inception to present day. The Ikhwanweb was particularly useful for presenting the official position on unfolding events and issues. This was complemented with primary and secondary literature review.

The absence of academic literature on the Muslim Sisters is on account of a number of movement-and context- specific factors. First, when the Muslim Brothers sought to assume a role in the political life of Egypt, it was members of the political bureau of the movement that were placed in

the limelight and they all happed to be men. Second, the Muslim Brothers lived many decades under controlled tolerance subject to periods of imprisonment and repression and hence they sought to spare women members becoming security targets. Third, as will be discussed below, because the Muslim Sisters ae subsumed under the Muslim Brothers, the latter have served as their gatekeepers and have therefore kept a tight lid on who has access to insider knowledge on the agential and organizational dynamics. Finally, the Muslim Sisters are conscious that the Muslim Brothers have been under attack in parts of academia and the media for their position on women's equality and this has undeniably put them in a defensive position.

Another element of the methodology is the researcher's own positionality and standpoint, both of which affect the research (England 1994). I am an Egyptian who is an insider insofar as I have been a participant observer in many feminist circles since 1996. However, I am simultaneously an outsider insofar as I have been peripheral to the central decision-making core within Egyptian feminist and do not have 'insider' status to the Muslim Sisters, not least because I do not politically belong to the movement. In order to address this latter limitation, I relied on first-hand accounts, narratives and autobiographies as much as possible, in order to avoid the objectification of the movement. On standpoint, as a feminist, I have consciously avoided an 'appraisal approach' towards the Muslim Sisters, guided by a 'checklist' on where they stand on different issues. Nonetheless, power relations are key to my understanding of feminism and have been central to this enquiry. In practice, this has meant examining ways in which agency has been enhanced or circumscribed in a historicized, contextualized manner.

The Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood: what shapes agency?

The concept of agency is 'typically used to characterise individuals as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of choice' (Lister 2003:38). The term is particularly useful as a concept for engaging with the

trajectories of the Muslim Sisters on several grounds. Firstly, there is a wide body of scholarship that has critiqued the way in which scholarship on women in the Middle East has been orientalist, especially with respect to Islam (see for example Cooke 2001, Mahmoud 2012, Abu-Lughod 2010, Ahmed 1992 among many others). The word 'agency' is used here in a descriptive rather than normative, allowing for the exploration of how people act as agents through a broad myriad of expressions and forms. It is intended to explore ways in which individuals respond to changes in their own perceptions of themselves and their contexts in relation to their roles within the Muslim Brotherhood. Notwithstanding that the word agency has been associated in the literature with the individual human agent, it should not be confused with individualist. In her discussion of citizenship in the Arab world, Suad Joseph highlights the importance of engaging with agency in terms of the 'connective self', one that is not construed in western individualistic terms. She argues that 'Connective persons do not experience boundary, autonomy, separateness as their primary defining features. Rather, they focus on relatedness.' (2002:25). Understanding the agency of the Muslim Sisters in terms of connective selves allows for a relational approach that recognizes the fluidity and dynamism informing their perceptions and choices and the women and men they engage with more broadly in society.

As the concept of agency is conceived in terms of 'achieving goals that people happen to value' (Drydyk 2013:251), the emphasis is on the subject's own terms, rather than weighed against someone else's. Feminist scholarship has pointed to the absence of women's voices in much of mainstream literature on social change precisely because of the negation of women's individual and collective subjectivities (Lister 2003). Moreover, a copious body of scholarship on women who identify with Islamist movements and/or political thought, including that of the Muslim Sisters have highlighted the Western bias in the interpretive frameworks with which their role, ideology and status are projected (Fernea 1985,

Cooke 2001, Karam 1998, 2002, Mahmoud 2012, El Mahdi 2010, Osman 2003, Maumoon 2007, Abdel Latif (2008) Abdel Latif and Ottaway 2007).

Hence, in the concept of agency, there is scope for reclaiming women's voice and recognizing the terms of engagement upon which agents enact their choices. This is again highly relevant for the study of the Muslim Sisterhood as one expression of women's agency in the Middle East, since its conjecture is that women are active agents, not passive objects of the movement's vision and mission.

However, a recognition of women as active agents does not assume they operate in a vacuum. The analytical value of the concept of agency would be deeply compromised if it is not examined in a dialectical relationship to structure. Put simply, 'human agents, whether individuals or collectivities, have power or are powerful within structural limits, which enable and constrain their power' (Haywards and Luke 2008:12). The interface between agency and structure has been a source of deep contestation in scholarship- where does agency start and structure begin? However, two dimensions of this dynamic relationship are particularly important here. First, the exercise of agency does not exclusively determine outcomes, since structural factors such as power dynamics of an organization 'will affect the outcome no matter what the preference of the actors are' (Dowding 23). Moreover, agents' choices, preferences and roles are also deeply shaped by 'deep structure' (Dowding 23). Deep structure 'not only provides incentives for agents to act in certain manners given their objectives, they create these objectives for them' (ibid). This points to the importance of adopting an approach that while, cognizant of individual agency, is informed by an awareness that the choices of an agent are deeply influenced by the subtle norms, values and worldviews of the environment in which they are and were embedded. This offers another level of analytical insights to be drawn from the study of the Muslim Sisters, namely the deep structures informing both the individual agent's family, community, Muslim Brotherhood organizational affiliation

and the norms of the broader Egyptian context at that particular historical moment.

Moreover, while examining the agency of the Muslim Sisters, it would be methodologically spurious to assume that there is a clear pathway between their purposive choices and the broader agency of the Muslim Brothers on at least two accounts. First, not all the Muslim Sisters may necessarily choose to exercise their agency through action (since inaction is a possibility). Second, there are often unintended consequences of one's agency, due to the agency of others as well as a constellation of structural factors. Haywards and Lukes note that 'agents can have power that they never exercise, and they can have power the effects of which they do not intend.' A broad view of agency is essential in order not to attribute outcomes exclusively to the actions of a set of individuals when the context is more complex (Haywards and Lukes 2008:7). Hence, caution is needed to avoid simplistic attribution of the Muslim Sisters' agency to broader movement choices without taking into account a wide array of other determinants.

One way in which the agency of the Muslim Sisters has been explored is through what Omayma Abdel Latif described as their activism under Mubarak. Writing in 2008, Abdel Latif (2008) argued that the Muslim Sisters were conscious that they were denied leadership positions within the movement and that they could play a greater role beyond that of foot soldiers in elections. Abdel Latif (2008) argued that the Muslim Sisters' ability to reform the MB to allow for greater participation in decision-making and direction was undermined by the contingencies of the struggle against the security state. Abdel Latif argued that 'a more democratic political environment, no doubt, boosts the fortunes of Brothers who favour women's activism. But as long as repressive policies continue against the movement, the balance will tilt in favour of the more conservative elements, who want to restrict women's activism and role because of the risk of a security crackdown' (Abdel Latif 2008: 12). Abdel

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Latif's argument is premised on the justifications that the Muslim Brotherhood leadership consistently provided in defense of its position not to have women in high decision-making positions, namely, protecting them from the ruthlessness of the regime. Abdel Latif's hypothesis (2008) is that once the shackles of authoritarian rule are removed, the Muslim Sisters will have the freedom to demand their rights, and press for full inclusion in the hierarchy of the movement, giving hardliners little excuse to contest their claims. While Egypt did not become a democratic regime in 2011, the security apparatus of the Mubarak regime was brought down (at least temporarily) and Islamist movements were able to enjoy full unrestricted freedom to engage in politics. With this reconfigured political order post-2011, it became possible- as is undertaken in the second part of this paper- to explore, first, whether the Muslim Sisters challenged their position within the Muslim Brotherhood and second, whether this translated into greater participation in central decision-making.

The post-Mubarak political context also set the stage for interrogating Saba Mahmoud's critique of feminist conceptions of agency as being 'primarily in terms of resistance to the regularizing impedus of structures of normativity' (Mahmoud 2012: 13). Saba's ethnographic study on women's participation in the mosque movement between 1995-1997 leads her to reconstitute the concept of agency to pinpoint that norms are not a social imposition, or a feature of structure, rather for a frequenter of the mosque movement, 'the very substance of her intimate, valorized interiority'. There is an ambivalence as to whether Mahmoud is referring to the contemporary Muslim Sisters or not in her ethnography. On the one hand, she traces the emergence of the mosque movement to some key figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Key among them is Hassan el Banna who harnessed the power of da`wa [prosletization, call to God] through mosques to counter the in his view the unsatisfactory religious education extended formally by the `ulama. On the emergence of women's agency as da`eyat in mosques, Mahmoud traces the

emergence of this phenomenon as well as the growth of women's participation in all-women learning circles in the mosque to the spiritual godmother of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zeinab el Ghazali. On the other hand, Mahmoud notes that 'only a very few of the mosque groups are affiliated with the Muslim Brothers' (2012: 71). Even for a seasoned ethnographer, it would have been very difficult to decipher the percentage of mosques who are Muslim Brotherhood affiliated because the movement and its members would have done every effort to conceal their identity on account of their vulnerability to constant security apparatus' harassment. Hence the extent to which da`eyat or their followers have Muslim Brotherhood sympathies (along the different tiers identified above) would be very difficult to determine in a few Cairene mosques, let along across the country. However, assuming that Mahmoud's account were to apply to the Muslim Sisters, the question of whether the norms first are 'not simply a social imposition' and the extent to which they are not the object of resistance when the context of the mosque movement radically changes need to be interrogated. This is attempted in the discussion of the agility of agency in the highly fluid context of post-Mubarak Egypt.

The historical trajectory of the Muslim Sisters

The history of the organizational positioning of the Muslim Sisters within the Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy is central to understanding the structural constraints to the emergence of an autonomous Muslim Sisterhood movement. Women members of the Muslim Brotherhood were organizationally envisaged to serve as the helping hand of the Brotherhood and never as a parallel women-led movement. Shortly following Hassan el Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Ismailiya in 1928, he established a club, a mosque, a school for boys followed in 1932 by a school for girls named '*Umahat al Mo'meneen*' (the mothers of believers). The school was designated with teaching the wives, daughters and relatives of the Muslim Brotherhood members, combining Islamic

teaching with subjects that are seen to be pertinent to women's domestic role (Khayal and El Gohary 1993:231-232). The female staff entrusted with teaching the students were given the title of 'the Muslim Sisters group' [ferqah] (ibid. 1993: 232). Hassan el Banna envisioned a role for the Muslim Sisters that would extend beyond the classroom and encompass da'wa among women in the households of Muslim Brotherhood members and society more widely. Makarem el Deiry notes that he first began to give six women weekly lessons then identified 120 female university graduates and highly cultured women to provide them with a year's training on doctrinal and daily life matters (El Deiry 325-326).

Hassan el Banna drew internal by-laws for the organizational structure of the group in which he established modes of communication between the leader of the Sisters Division and the Brotherhood leadership to be through a trusted male Muslim Brother. According to Gom'a Amin, the Muslim Sisters reached the apex of their activism in Cairo between 1943-1945. During the 1940s, the Muslim Sisters were engaged in religious education, da'wa, charity, and fund-raising and were encouraged to establish their own women's non-profit associations. While the curriculum for members of the Muslim Brothers offered intense training in Islamic doctrine as well as political apprenticeship, the curriculum of the Muslim Sisters was heavily informed by the gender roles that the movement wished them to play as mothers and wives, and in public, religious outreach with women.

As the activities of the Sisters grew, an (all-male) implementing committee was formed in 1944 to regulate the work and included a small number of women assuming leadership roles. We only have one version of what led Hassan el Banna to decide to prohibit women'leadership in the cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood, that of Gom'a Amin. He said there was a leadership dispute between a number of women which led to not only the removal of all women from leadership positions but the containment of the Muslim Sisters' position within the organization structure.

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Unlike other parts of the Muslim Brotherhood, like the student tanzeem for example, the new Muslim Sisters division had no positions, committees, taskforces, or any other organizational mechanism for delegating responsibilities and authorities. This heavy centralization, containment and prohibition of women's leadership is what led Zeinab el Ghazali, according to one leading Muslim Sister, Fatma Abd el Hady, to reject leading the Muslim Sisters when offered the position by Hassan el Banna. El Banna refused to delineate a role and place for the Muslim Sisters as equal and equivalent to the Muslim Brothers and empathetically insisted that the Muslim Sisters are part of the Muslim Brothers (Abd el Hady 2011: 23, Cooke 2001: 88).

It is only many years later in 1948 that El Ghazali declared her allegiance to El Banna and in 1965, Zeinab el Ghazali formally joined the Muslim Brothers. Yet even then, she did not bring her own women's organization under the fold of the Muslim Brothers. Rather her activism was part of the special division led by Sayed Qutb's to engage in armed resistance against the Nasserite regime. She was tried by the Nasserite regime for being a member of the special unit accused of planning to overthrow the regime and was subjected to the most inhumane forms of torture while imprisoned (Al-Ghazali 1999). She was to re-emerge later as the spiritual mentor of the Muslim Sisters in the 1970s and is venerated as a role model among the Muslim Sisters to this day.

In the absence of a tanzeem for women, the Muslim Sisters have been governed (with the exception of the first few years) by male leadership, have more limited opportunity for leadership training in comparison to men, and no voting power over the members wo represent the movement (not to mention they cannot be leaders themselves).

In terms of initiation into the movement, there are parallel pathways which are deeply gendered. Girls join *al zahrawat* (roses) while boys join *al ashbal* (cubs). While girls are equipped for their roles as future mothers and wives and for outreach among women, boys are equipped for

leadership though the training received changed dramatically after 2011 (see below). If a person wants to join the Muslim Brotherhood as an adult, they have to go through a number of phases. First there is the '*mohebeen*', those who believe or are sympathetic to the movement's message but are not organizationally affiliated. Then there are al moua'yed, the supporters, whom the movement draws on for action, then al moltazem, those who have a deeper commitment to the cause, then the worker `amel who consistently strives to strengthen the movement and the moujahed – s/he who strives in jihad, i.e. is prepared to suffer for the movement. Internally those that achieve the status of *moujahed* have more weight than those on lower tiers and hence, women's acquisition of that status is extraordinarily important.

In 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood was dissolved, and so was the Muslim Sisters as part of it. The next two decades saw an intense crackdown from President Nasser on the Muslim Brotherhood, with members of the movement being imprisoned and tortured (some of them Muslim Sisters), going underground, or fleeing overseas. The Sisters played a central role to the survival of the movement and the coping strategies of individuals and families. The Sisterhood rose to the task of distributing food to the malnourished Brothers in prison as well as being the lines of communication through which important messages and information was relayed. They collected money and distributed it to the female headed households of the Brothers who were in prison or who had fled to Saudi Arabia and other countries. Abdo Dessouki, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood's account of the history of the Muslim Sisters' provides a profile of leading figures of the Muslim Sisters. One of the common threads is that all the selected figures were those who had endured Nasser's crackdown and are celebrated for their sacrificial spirit in support of their imprisoned family members, the movement and their families (Dessouki 2011).

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Once Sadat assumed power in 1970, he sought to obliterate the influence of the leftist and Nasserite forces in Egypt by empowering the Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood. An entente was establishment between Omar el Telmesany, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sadat which saw the rebirth of the movement, and though its formal status remained illegal, in practice was given the freedom to shrive and flourish. Under Sadat's economic liberalization policies, the role of faith-based organizations in providing services grew, and the Muslim Brothers played a central role in it. During this period, the Muslim Sisters became active once again in public life through the movement's many welfare associations, mosques and university campus outreach.

Under Mubarak, relations between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood faced periods of understanding and fallouts. During the first two decades of Mubarak's rule, the MB continued to thrive as a tolerated but illegal entity, participating in elections but under the watchful eye (and often arresting clutch) of the security apparatus. In 2000, for the first time, the Brotherhood nominated one candidate Jehan al Hallafawy who ran in the electoral district of Al Raml in Alexandria. Al Hallafawy's husband, Ibrahim el Za'farany was considered from the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and was at one point one of the members of the Guidance Bureau. He strongly supported his wife's candidature and ran himself for office before. Al Hallafawy was a strong people mobilizer and battled to the end, though she was subject to extensive security harassment and lost the electoral battle on account of suspected voter rigging. However, it is important to note that she and her husband left the Muslim Brotherhood and formed their own party after the Egyptian revolution of 2011 (see below).

The year 2005 is considered a defining moment as the government relaxed its security constraints on the movement's activities. (Anani 2007:239-231) and the Brotherhood gained 88 seats in the 444 seat

parliament, running as independents using the Brotherhood's slogan Islam is the Solution. They acquired the largest representation in parliament they had ever gained. During the 2005 elections female supporters and members of the MB defied the state security harassment and the thugs hired by the ruling National Democratic party in order to reach the polls and vote for the MB. In 2005, the Brotherhood fielded one candidate, Makarem el Deiry, a professor at al Azhar university, born in 1950 (whose husband was killed by the regime in 1965). El Deiry was fielded in the middle class district of Madinet Nasr, and did well in the elections, scoring 6,000 voices, qualifying her to the second rounds of elections but losing to a ruling party candidate (Mohamed el Sallab). The fact that only one woman out of many candidates was fielded is not unique to the MB, other political parties did not do far much better, including the progressive leftist Tagammu party. The last elections held under Mubarak's tenure was considered so heavily engineered by the security apparatus and its legitimacy was so disputed that the Muslim Brotherhood pulled out of the electoral race straight after the second round. They had initially fielded three women under the quota seats but had withdrawn from the elections. The elections were considered one of the main drivers of the formation of a counter-coalition against the regime (Tadros 2012).

Post-Mubarak political ascendency of the Brothers: selective spaces of the Muslim Sisters' political empowerment

When a number of youth movements and some political parties called upon the Egyptian people to join the protests that were planned for January 25th, 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guidance bureau had decided against joining the political forces in calling upon its members to join. Yet as with some young male members of the movement, young female members joined independently. One young woman recalls that she decided to join the protests and she was warned by a senior Muslim Sister that there was no takleef [order] from the Guidance Bureau and she went down anyway. This is the day that she identified as the beginning of the

end of her relationship with the Brothers. Most of the Muslim Sisters joined the rest of the movement in the public squares from the 28th January 2011 when there was a formal delegation from the Supreme Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood to participate. In interviews, female and male members of the Muslim Brothers said that in addition to participating as Egyptian women in the uprising, the Muslim Sisters played two critical roles: first, as part of the medical team that attended to the injured and assaulted, and second, preparing and distributing food to the masses camped in Tahrir Square. Some of the Muslim Sisters had participated in a number of other protests such as against the war on Iraq or in defense of the Palestinians, but for many Muslim Sisters interviewed, the revolution was when women's voices were amplified. However, the Egyptian revolution also created a space for young people of different political orientations to interact, and as some of the younger Muslim Sister interviewees shared, the myths about the political other and in the process, many of the myths about the 'political other' were dispelled. Some of the younger Muslim Sisters shared that in the aftermath of experiencing such a historically tectonic event (the revolution), they expected that the Muslim Brotherhood would also experience a major overhaul in its organizational structure from within.

Shortly after the Egyptian revolution on the 29th-30th April 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood held its first Shura Council meeting openly. It was a golden opportunity to elect women members to the Shura Council, in view of the fact that there were no longer security harassments, however, this did not materialize. Some of the female members of the Muslim Brotherhood began to openly call for leadership positions within the movement. At a MB youth meeting in April 2011 attended by around 1,500 youth, the issues around the movement's organizational structures were raised, including the necessity of establishing an organizational structure – a tanzeem- for the Sisters of the Brotherhood. Shortly after, on the 2nd of July, 2011, a conference specifically under the theme 'Women from the

revolution to renaissance'. This high level conference was attended by the Supreme Guide, Bad`ie, Khayrat al Shatter, the deputy Guide, members of the Guidance Bureau, key actors and some 2,500 sisters. Bad'ie praised the role played by women in the revolution as activists, mothers, sisters and wives of the protestors and started by paying tribute to the mothers of martyrs. The recommendations spoke of enhancing women's political representation in syndicates, political parties and activism through NGOs, and raising women's awareness of the conspiracies aimed at undermining the family (presumably international actors plus local feminist organizations). One key concession, recounted by an interviewee, was that they allowed the Muslim Sisters for the first time ever to assume leadership positions in the administrative units across the country, first in 6th October City, Alexandria and Fayoum (interviews, 2012). However, for female members of the Muslim Brotherhood who expected a more substantial shake up in the organizational hierarchy, they found themselves with one of two options: adapt or exit.

With the promulgation of a new electoral law in 2011, for the first time in its history, the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed to establish its own political party and therefore become formally a legitimate political contender on the Egyptian scene. The establishment of the Freedom and Justice party created many opportunities for women in the Muslim Brotherhood to become politically involved, as founders, leaders and as members on several committees.

The political agency of women of Islamist affiliation including the Muslim Brotherhood flourished. They had extensive and expansive skills in outreach and constituency building established through years of welfare provision through charitable organisations and through building bridges with women in universities and educational institutes as well as religious education in mosques (Wickham 2003).

A number of interviewees with current and defected members of the Muslim Brotherhood cited the mosque as a central site for the

mobilization of the masses. One Muslim Sister said it was unfortunate that they had to resort to slogans which press people to vote for the FJP (or yes in the constitutional referendum of 2011, see Hamzawy 2013) if they wished to defend Islam, but faced with El Nour Salafi party, they felt there was no other option if they were to secure voters' support. It is interesting that E. who defected from the Muslim Brotherhood said that for voters and expanded outreach, the mohebeen counted as the most important tier because their numbers are so large. A lot of the mohebeen were from the mosque movements. The intention here is not necessarily to suggest that the piety movement members concealed their political affinities (although for some that cannot be negated as a possibility). Rather it is to suggest that women mosque frequenters' vision of Islamic ethics and piety may have found the Muslim Brotherhood's message of engaging in direct political action to defend Islam appealing. This is particularly so if these messages are being conveyed by respected Muslim Sisters that have been active in the mosques for several decades. In short, the politicization of the mosque space through the mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters questions the notion that piety movements engage in a different kind of politics (Mahmoud 2012). Flexible politicization is possible under particular contextual dynamics and this perhaps requires a revisiting of the notion that mosque movements exclusively engage in a kind of politics around ethics and piety as suggested by Mahmoud.

Between February 2011 to June 2013, Egypt witnessed two constitutional referendums (March 2011 and December 2012), a parliamentary and a presidential election (December 2011 and June 2012 respectively). The mobilization of women and families by the Muslim Sisters was central to the successive victories that the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed in these elections. As one interviewee noted, every woman played a role in the outreach: housewives would go down to the markets, the public transport, their neighbours spreading the word about our party, girls as young as 15 who would go down to the shops and speak

to the people, discuss their electoral platform and win them om their side. Women would move from one electoral district to another participating in the events that were being held for public engagement, sometimes leaving home early in the morning and returning by midnight. It is also important to note that the exigencies of the political moment , one where the Muslim Brotherhood needed the full participation and mobilization of its female members in order to encourage people to vote for them meant that the doctrine of prioritizing domesticity over public roles was not one that interviewees felt prevailed during that period. In fact this was a time in which the Muslim Sisters were travelling frequently, campaigning out of the house until late with relaxed curfew and rules on gender mixing. It is of no surprise that in many interviews with women members of the Muslim Brotherhood they cited women's political freedom to exercise their agency, uninhibited by the security apparatus as the most important change in women's lives post-Mubarak.

While the Freedom and Justice party fielded 79 candidates in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections, the majority were not at the head of the proportional lists – as with the majority of other political parties whose placement of women in winnable positions was woefully low (See Tadros 2013). Only four Muslim Sisters made it to parliament. The overall percentage of women in Egypt's first post-Mubarak parliament (with a majority Islamist representation) was at 2.2% shamefully low.

The highly organized, co-ordinated and motivated manner of working of the FJP was in striking contrast to many of the other parties who were still struggling to build a constituency base and identify effective outreach methods. However, this was also a context in which several leading Muslim Brotherhood members such as Abdel Moniem Abou el Fotouh and Ibrahim el Zaafarany officially left the Muslim Brotherhood to establish their own political parties. For young women who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood but participated in the January 2011 revolution and who grew increasingly disenfranchised with the movement's expectation of

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obedience, there was no option to internally reform the movement because the majority's primary allegiance was to the leaders. Hence, women had two options, either to comply or to exit, and some did defect by joining other political parties, ones that had not existed prior to the Egyptian revolution.

Once President Morsi won the presidential elections in June 2012, a handful of prominent older women belonging to the movement as well as sympathisers were given some positions in the constituent assembly delegated with writing the constitution, as well as in advisory positions to the President. For example, Omayma Kamel was appointed a member of the constituent Assembly delegated with the responsibility of drawing up the constitution, and a presidential aide to President Morsi and was put forward as a parliamentary candidate (though she did not make it) (Tadros 2016). Likewise Dr Hoda Ghaneya headed the women's committee of the Freedom and Justice Party, was an MP in parliament and a member of the constituent assembly (Tawfik 2013). Pakinam el Sharkawy, a professor of political science at Cairo University who was not officially a member of the Brotherhood but was a sympathiser also assumed several roles in the Morsi administration. She was an aide to President Morsi, headed the Egyptian delegation to the 57th Commission on the Status of Women in 2013, and was appointed head of the National Council for Justice and Equality9. It seems it was a purposeful policy on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood to allow a select number of women to occupy positions of leadership within the Freedom and Justice party and government but not within the actual movement. In an interview with the Freedom and Justice party's flagship newspaper, Hoda Ghaneya was asked about the accusations waged against the FJP and Muslim Brotherhood for marginalizing the role of women (Tawfik 2013). Ghaneya denied such allegations pointing to the role of women [in the MB] in mobilizing against Mubarak's authoritarian regime, their participation in politics and service delivery. 'The talk about the marginalization of the role of women inside

the party and Brotherhood is unfounded and society is witness to that. How can women be excluded when some of us are former MPs and members of the constituent assembly that is delegated with the writing of Egypt's constitution after the revolution and some of us became members of the Shura Council. Where is exclusion then' Having noted that all such positions are in the external political sphere and none within the Muslim Brotherhood the journalist proceeded to ask about whether women in the foreseeable future may become members of the Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood. She replied by rejecting the idea that women's participation in the Guidance Bureau is related to their exclusion, emphasizing that women are active in the social and political life. When she was asked whether the by-laws may change to allow women to become members of the Guidance Bureau', she replied: 'This is left to the process of development and change within the Muslim Brotherhood.' And reverted to talking about women in the FJP. The interview is highly revealing in that leading women in the Muslim Brotherhood recognize that the pathway for political leadership is through the FJP while the organizational structure and hierarchy remains by and large resistant to change.

Conclusion: Revisiting the regime-movement-gender hierarchy debate within Islamist movements

This paper examined how political context influenced the sites for exercising agency for the Muslim Sisters as well as how in turn they shaped and influenced their own pathways of influence within and outside the movement. In so doing, the concept of agency as framed by Mahmoud (2012) in the exploration of the mosque movements of Egypt has proven to be too static. What may have appeared as an expression of agency through the spiritual realm during Mubarak's era assumed an overtly political form of agency thereafter. Agency is highly dynamic and its politicization flexible, and the mosque movement became a powerful repertoire for the overt and direct mobilization of a political constituency.

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Moreover, the paper specifically interrogated the extent to which openness of the political system influenced the MB's own acquiescence to women assuming positions of power within the movement. The main argument of this paper is that political context hugely influences the sites and pathways for women to assume leadership- however, outside the hierarchy of the organization. The deeply constraining political environment was used as a rationale to circumscribe the assumption of political leadership positions in public life and to postpone the question of internal reform to the gender hierarchy within the movement.

The paper disputed Abdel Latif's (2008) and Abdel Latif and Ottaway (2007)'s hypothesis that the gender hierarchy within the Muslim Brotherhood would become more inclusive of women in leadership positions if they were not repressed by authoritarian rule. It argued that the opening of political space post-Mubarak allowed the Muslim Sisters to thrive and assume leadership positions through the Freedom and Justice party and civil society. However, this did not transform into opportunities for leadership within the Muslim Brotherhood. This was not through lack of claims-making on the part of activist women. From the interviews it became clear some of the Muslim Sisters did press for their own organizational entity, voting rights and representation in the central decision-making structures such as the Shura Council and Guidance Bureau.

For women and men who pressed for reforms , there were two options, akin to what Albert Hirschman described in his seminal work 'Exit, voice and Loyalty' (1970) whereby faced with conflict within one's organization, one has two options, either to exit or to voice, i.e. articulate the grievance and seek to remedy it. When one operates in a closed organization and there is a strong sense of loyalty, the inclination is to voice grievances rather than exit. As there was limited room for manoeuvring, some exited or were expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood. E. left on the 16th November, 2016 and one of the contributing factors (though not the only

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one) was her frustration at the inertia in recognizing the Muslim Sisters. She and another [male] defector said they were outraged that while in Gaza (a context under occupation and deeply patriarchal), Hamas had established an automous kayan 'entity' for women, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt still did not have their own structure.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement remained immune to any tinkering with its system. This was not on account of the absence of claims-making by the Muslim Sisters, many campaigned and pressed for the creation of a tanzeem, for voting rights and for positions in the Shura council and Guidance Bureau. The resistance to reforming the structure was on account of the increased empowerment of the Old Guard, not as predicted by Abdel Latif (2008), their containment when political repression relaxed. As the movement sought to remain intact, those Sisters that could not conform had no choice but to exit.

Despite the Muslim Broterhood's major contribution to religious thought through prolific scholarship, it has retained among some of its leaders and rank and file an affiliation to Salafi thought. This has inhibited the prospects of the emergence of a cohort of Muslim Sisters who are an authoritative source of religious teaching for the Brothers. Women can play a role prosletizing to other women, but ultimately matters of religious teaching are kept to men's leadership. Moreover, from the interviews and accounts undertaken in 2012, it seems that the mosques were key sites for the mobilization of the Muslim Sisters of voters and supporters. This questions the possibility of flexible politicization of the women who frequent the mosques as part of the piety movement. It is perhaps timely to reconsider whether the agential commitment to a kind of politics around ethics and piety is always the case when political opportunity and circumstances alter with regime type.

Since 2013, the Muslim Sisters have played a leading role in raising awareness internationally of the predicament of the Muslim Brotherhood, and internally, have engaged in extensive advocacy and resistance. Just as

they did during the wave of repression in the 1950s-1960s under Nasser, the Muslim Sisters have risen to the task of providing care and support for the families whose members are imprisoned, gone into exile or suffering. It remains to be seen whether the significance of the agency of the Muslim Sisters under these difficult political conditions will put pressure in the long run on the Guidance Bureau to reconsider its gendered organizational hierarchy.

The current period (2013-2016) is one in which the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Sisters as part of the movement have been subjected to a systematic, extreme and ruthless crackdown. Against this backdrop, the question of whether a women's *tanzeem* will be established will be put aside as the survival of the movement is prioritized. If the Old Guard has been weakened by the crackdown, then undoubtedly the younger generations may push in future for greater reform. Factors that may influence the position of the Muslim Sisters organizationally include how their sacrifices (and jihad) translate into recognition within the movement, the authority and composition of the male members of the Guidance Bureau and the ideological predisposition of the voting members of the Muslim Brotherhood. If the latter come from the rank and file who have been Salafized, this will not bid well for the women. On the other hand, for women who have assumed political leadership positions within the party, this may, with time, translate into pressure for internal reform of the movement. Perhaps the weakening of the Guidance Bureau will also have a reverse impact on the movement: strengthening the reformists within.

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Notes

[1] In this paper, *Islamic* refers to what draws on Islam the religion, while *Islamist* is specifically used to describe those who support a political movement, force or party that aspires to power with a view of the instatement of a system of governance drawing on Shariah, while the term *Muslim* is referred to any person who follows Islam the faith irrespective of whether they support an Islamist party or not

[2] The word Salafi here is refers to Salafi political thought premised on the political thought of Ibn Hanbal who formed one of the four schools in Islamic jurisprudence and the highly conservative Imam Ibn Taymeya, both are considered main sources of Salafi thinking.

3 A people, nation, or race. The word occurs approximately forty times in the Quran. Ummah is a term for a group of people associated with certain ties such as language, history, sex, and/or religion. The nation is considered a larger entity than the state. In Arabic and Islamic culture, the nation is a gathering of people with one religion (Islam)

[4] Wahabi ideology emanates from the political thought of Mohammed Abd Ibn el Wahab (1703-1791) in Saudi Arabia to revive the tradition of returning to the fundamentals of Islam.

[5] The Salafis believe in Al Salaf al Saleh, which refers to the righteous path being that lived and prescribed by the Prophet and his companions only in the first century of Muslim society (Abasi 2002, Bakr 2011, Othman 1981). Salafis reject all forms of ijetehad (revisionist interpretation of the text). An authoritative source on Salafism, Dr Mustapha Helmy defines Salafism as underpinned by three foundations. The first is to follow Al Salaf el Salah (the Prophet and his companions). The second is to reject modern tafsir (interpretation). The third is to follow the ways of thinking mentioned in the Koran and reject philosophic, logic and other ways of thinking Helmy (1976: 35-46)

[6] For a most authoritative description of the Muslim Brotherhood's organizational hierarchy, see Mitchell (1969)

[7] The interviews of 2006 were undertaken by the author [details to be added after peer review to protect anonymity] while interviews undertaken in 2012 were done by Egyptian journalist Robeir el Fares.

[8] Also see Muslim Brotherhood, 2005, 2006, undated for position statements on their vision of the status and role of women and gender organization of social and politics

[9] The council 'was formed in November 2011 by the government of then-prime minister Essam Sharaf. It was mandated with promoting the ideals of justice and equality, disseminating a culture of citizenship and furthering the principle of equality regardless of race, religion or gender' Ahram Online 2013