EGYPT

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As the oldest and largest Islamist movement in the Arab world, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has long constituted a bellwether for the evolution of political Islam. Its shift from anti-system to electoral politics starting in the 1980s triggered a long-running debate in Middle East studies and policy circles about whether Islamist participation would help or hurt democratisation in the long run. As the largest political opposition in countries where political liberalisation was, per regime and international narratives, inevitable, what Islamists signalled about their democratic commitments mattered, for they might strengthen or sink democracy with their participation. While scholars debated the relative importance of Islamist positions versus the institutional barriers of electoral authoritarianism in determining whether democratisation would succeed, most agreed that a stake in electoral politics would reduce chances that Islamists might play spoiler in an ultimate transition to democracy. Despite a scholarly consensus that electoral incentives under authoritarian rule were ambiguous, and regimes and Islamists had different goals in expanding electoral inclusion, scholars identified key pathways of adaptation that were likely to boost motivations and behavioural norms functional for democracy: Islamists would adapt to electoral incentives in a cumulative fashion, reorienting operating principles and activities increasingly to electoral needs, expanding alliances with new social and political actors, and facing trade-offs between religious and electoral goals. They would then accept majority-based electoral politics with multiple legal parties as the only game in town, dropping calls for a polity governed by religious rules. Scholars used the phrase “inclusion-moderation” to summarise this path of adaptation and political learning.

As the MB participated in Egyptian electoral politics through the 1990s and 2000s, despite regime reversals and crackdowns, it appeared to invest increasingly in the electoral process, developing a parliamentary cadre, pressing for party status, forming alliances, and evolving new official positions on matters of pluralism, multiparty democracy, and equal citizenship of non-Muslims. When the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak allowed for free elections in 2011 and 2012, the movement formed a legal party and won elections for the first time. Yet despite being visibly transformed by electoral participation, with deepening incentives to prioritise electoral outreach, the MB did not follow the institutional and ideological trajectory scholars had expected. The MB and its newly formed party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), used full-throated Islamist rhetoric in electoral campaigning in 2011–2012. Extensive organisational adaptation to electoral work did not weaken the movement relative to the party, and as large
numbers of cadres engaged in electoral politics, they did not pull the movement in a more compromise-seeking direction. When the MB’s elected presidential candidate Mohammed Morsi faced the threat of military overthrow in 2013 (and was ultimately toppled later that year), the language of martyrdom for God and the framing of political enemies as religious enemies re-emerged in the public discourse of the Brothers, including those closely associated with electoral work. This development threw many assumptions of inclusion-moderation, particularly regarding the mechanisms by which Islamists would “moderate” their ideological positions, into question.

Moderation can have multiple meanings, and is a politically charged term, historically used by authoritarian regimes to define the kind of public religion acceptable to them and categorise Islamists as uniquely anti-democratic. While measuring moderation as a set of ideological commitments conducive to democracy may be problematic (secular parties and regimes have rarely been democratic in the Middle East, after all), and playing by the rules of the electoral game does not necessarily reflect ideological support for it – we can identify pathways and dimensions of moderation that operate in similar ways across political contexts. The main dimensions of adaptation are organisational and ideational: the mother movement and its ideological leadership cede decision-making to an electorally oriented cadre, allowing everyday organisational priorities to be restructured around electoral incentives, the overall movement drops the more exclusionary aspects of its political ideology, and accepts those who do not share their religious commitments as political equals. The main mechanisms or pathways are those of political learning – movements respond to electoral incentives by calculating the benefits of participation, pursue compromise and strategic gains, and become increasingly flexibly on core ideological beliefs that may be stumbling blocks for expanding constituencies – and organisational specialisation – political incentives increasingly separate party and movement work, and as movement resources are increasingly invested in electoral work, religious or ideological priorities are downgraded. The political incentives that encourage adaptation may vary, and scholars of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Morocco have shown that repressive political contexts can trigger moderation as well. The exact outcomes of adaptation may, similarly, be different, but in some form, they constitute an internalisation and institutionalisation of norms and practices that may have been adopted strategically for electoral participation but ultimately shift the movement’s perception of its own political mission and identity.

The MB showed clear evidence of following many of the pathways outlined above both under Mubarak’s rule and after his overthrow. It adapted strategically to the expansion of political opportunity after 2011, forming a separate political party, introducing a new training curriculum to capitalise on political opportunities, and shifting operational priorities substantially to electoral outreach. Two major elections, for parliament in 2011 and the presidency in 2012, were genuine majority-seeking opportunities for the MB even as they ultimately allowed an entrenched security-military elite to delay the transfer of executive power to an elected government. The movement adapted its ideological positions strategically to signal its commitments to potential allies and to mobilise different coalitions. While the military coup and subsequent repression of the movement in 2013 ended this process, this case still offers an important and instructive test of how different mechanisms and conditions of political inclusion trigger substantial ideological and organisational adaptation for Islamist movements.

I will argue that the evolution of the MB from 2011 to 2016 confirms the significance of the mechanisms outlined in inclusion-moderation theory while showing the multiple outcomes they may have depending on variations in adaptive strategies and conditions. Specifically, I find that (a) prior moderation under electoral authoritarianism was formative in shaping the movement’s ideological responses to new political incentives and its interpretation of new
opportunities, without necessarily encouraging progressive adaptation; (b) the complex and
dynamic political opportunity structures created by the shifting strategies of other parties and
institutional instability of democratic transitions offered contradictory rather than incremental
incentives for adaptation; (c) electoral strategies that protected core religious goals proved
unexpectedly functional for new electoral thresholds, challenging assumptions that Islamists
must trade off religious goals for power-seeking, and allowing the MB to alternate between
older and newer outreach strategies rather than following a linear adaptive path; and (d) under
specific conditions and given an adaptive strategy that prioritised message-seeking, new electoral
thresholds strengthened hard-line positions within movement ranks, rather than encouraging
cadres to invest in political office. Thus, while the MB did engage in many of the mechanisms
of political learning hypothesised in the inclusion-moderation literature, the ideological, strate-
gic, and organisational outcomes of this learning challenge the predictive utility of inclusion-
moderation.

Applying the comparative and theoretical contributions of Brocker and Kunkler (2013),
Tezcur (2010), and Jaffrelot (2013) to the literature on political learning for religious parties, I
will disaggregate the MB’s political learning experience in 2011–2016 into the different pro-
cesses and stages in which it adapted to new political opportunities, and study how movement
actors weighed message-seeking, power-seeking and organisational priorities and the risks and
rewards of change in deciding which of several possible pathways to pursue. I use internal
movement documents, interviews with movement cadres, and public reports to trace the MB’s
political learning in this period, focusing particularly on how movement cadres interpreted
political opportunity and justified their responses to it, and weighing this evidence against the
assumptions contained in the inclusion-moderation literature.

Inclusion-moderation literature and the stakes of the MB’s experience

The MB’s apparent divergence and ultimate reversal from a trajectory of gradual adaptation to
expanding political opportunity in 2011–2016 was pointed to by some analysts as evidence that
the movement’s increasing political inclusion had not been accompanied by significant
rethinking of policies and ideas, particularly regarding its commitment to democracy, and that
this conservative response to inclusion cast serious doubt on the inclusion-moderation thesis.
While many anti-Islamist political commentators in Egypt argued that the MB’s behaviour in
government made it clear they had never changed, others argued that the conditions of inclu-
sion had never really been met, given the persistence of military executive authority.

Yet the MB did follow pathways of adaptation that tested the assumptions and arguments of
the inclusion-moderation literature. One key assumption was that ideological movements
would adapt organisationally to new political opportunities in a way that strengthened pro-
politics constituencies within the movement and redirected its work from the message-seeking
characteristic of niche parties, to the pragmatic outreach characteristic of office-seeking ones.

Scholars of the MB pre-2011 attributed its prioritisation of organisational survival, religious
goals, and base maintenance over wider outreach and alliance-seeking to the political opportu-
nity structures of electoral authoritarianism, where limited opportunities alternated with bouts
of repression to keep Islamists permanent outsiders, arguing that while Islamists had shown
responsiveness to political opportunity, current electoral incentives were simply insufficient to
trigger wholesale organisational change. Minimal inclusion weighed against the risk of ulti-
mate repression tended to make leaderships “risk averse,” willing to develop a functional, but
limited, political cadre and mission without allowing electoral work to dominate the organisa-
tion. Despite these limitations, scholars noted that the MB had clearly tailored their behaviour
to political incentives and accepted the legitimacy and even necessity of electoral politics for achieving their goals, and as such had been “irrevocably transformed into a flexible political party that is highly responsive to the unforgiving calculus of electoral politics.” 12 Given new opportunities for majority- and office-seeking, by implication, the movement could be expected to undergo substantial organisational change.

Comparative and theoretical studies of Islamist moderation in other contexts also noted the importance of intra-movement political specialisation driven by electoral incentives: as Islamist parties became more autonomous from parent movements, they had greater scope for independent and pragmatic adaptation, even if they did not dominate eventually over their movements. 13 As Islamists focused more on constituency services and “pothole fixing,” the argument went, routine governance would crowd out religious goals in their operational priorities. 14 The MB’s formation of a political party in 2011 offered an opportunity to observe the process of institutional specialisation and a shift away from a survivalist, organisation-first strategy to one that could support alliance-seeking and promote pragmatists in the movement hierarchy.

The inclusion-moderation literature also emphasised ideological adaptation as an important mediator of the behavioural adaptation of Islamist parties to electoral politics. Scholars of Jordan explored how electoral participation pushed Islamists to change ideological positions that alienated potential non-Islamist allies, or conflicted with the principles and values of democracy, such as pluralism and gender equality. 15 Jillian Schwedler showed that electoral participation under authoritarianism in Jordan and Yemen produced ideological adaptation only when pro-participation leaders could successfully convince the base that electoral adaptation would not undermine core religious values, allowing them to redraw the “boundaries of justifiable action.” 16 While Schwedler and other scholars cautioned that framing democratic procedures as Islamically acceptable did not constitute acceptance of liberal democracy, they argued that substantive ideological and operational commitments to democracy did occur in the process of electoral engagement and could be gauged from internal party documents. 17

If the rules of further electoral participation stayed relatively stable, 18 and new electoral thresholds continued to beckon, according to these mechanisms, religious parties would increasingly invest in electoral work, shedding earlier risk-averse strategies; if pragmatism was rewarded, parties would have to choose between core religious commitments and electoral gain, 19 triggering intra-movement debates and fissures that would ultimately favour moderation. Yet moderation, as Brocker and Kunkler have noted, 20 and as the assumptions and sequences outlined above show, is a process based on decision-making at different stages, and it is to these decisions and their consequences that we now turn.

The MB’s pre-2011 organisational and ideational adaptation and implications for future evolution

Participating in limited parliamentary elections for the first time in the 1980s, the MB rapidly developed the organisational and strategic skills needed for electoral success. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, it responded predictably to political incentives and punishments, making accommodations with electoral authoritarianism in the hope of greater rewards in the future, rather than seeking a radical political transformation.

However, a key assumption of inclusion-moderation, that movements would give up the mission of “fundamentally … reorganiz[ing] social and political relations” when they became “primarily electoral parties seeking a popular mandate for change” did not hold for the MB. 21 Participation did not force the movement to downgrade its religious mission relative to a political one: the MB developed an electorally functional, religious-political hybrid organisational
structure that assimilated new political demands while preserving the primacy and overarching framework of the religious project and limiting organisational adaptation.

**Organisational priorities and political specialisation**

Analysts of the MB’s inclusion in the electoral-political order in Egypt from the 1980s to 2000s noted the importance of political participation in shaping a new, more pragmatic cadre that would drive the movement’s future leadership. While political work did produce and embolden a younger reformist cadre with a broader mission of social outreach, as Wickham shows, reformist advocacy for further organisational reform, including the formation of a separate political party, invariably faltered against movement conservatives’ insistence on the priority of the movement’s religious mission. Conservative “organisation men” exercised control over day-to-day movement work and member education despite a low public profile. While some leaders explored the legalisation of a party at various points in the 1980s and 1990s, the conservative preference for prioritising organisational discipline was reinforced by bouts of repression and threatened splits in the mid-1990s.

**Interpreting political opportunity and integrating electoral work into a religious mission**

Electoral participation paid steady dividends for the MB at first. By maintaining a parliamentary presence and participating in syndicate elections, it gained access to legal protections and new resources, and challenged the Mubarak regime’s narrative of an Islamist threat by showing that Islamists could be responsible political actors in an eventual post-authoritarian system. But new political opportunities required little substantive adaptation at first. Greater political freedom had helped the MB gain more visibility, and rather than threatening the core goals of the movement, electoral work was quite consistent with pursuing them. MB leaders promoted electoral work as a means to achieve the goals of social Islamisation framing campaigning as a tool for expanding preaching. Electoral participation allowed Brothers to perform “good Muslim-ness” in new ways, demonstrating what a good Islamic representative looked like in parliament, and voting righteously to stand up for one’s values. The desire to be counted was as expressive as it was instrumental: arguing for participation in a flawed election, one leader said: “We are a popular power. We must present our popularity as a whole and in the system.” Even rigged elections served as a skill-development “workshop” for training thought and action, and “attracting notice” to their ideas. Like other religious parties navigating new electoral opportunities while maintaining ideological base organisations, the pre-2011 MB retained its message-seeking priorities while power-seeking, using elections to show that it spoke for a religious constituency and could pressure the ruling party on matters important to this constituency.

**Ideological adaptation and the institutionalisation of political learning**

As expected by inclusion-moderation, politics triggered internal debates over strategy and ideology that forced an overhaul of key ideological positions – in short, political learning occurred. Yet its outcome was mixed. The MB pre-2011 justified democracy as a net positive for religion, a process that would allow the righteous to justly assert their values, and Muslims to fulfil the requirement to live their faith by serving others and fighting injustice, rather than supporting electoral politics for its own sake. New curriculum materials developed in the mid-
2000s demonstrated how this ideological adaptation had been distilled into internal doctrine: texts directed at full members affirmed the movement’s newer public commitments to the equal citizenship of Christians, but also emphasised the functionality of electoral politics in allowing righteous majorities to govern, argued that religious qualifications were needed to participate in *shura* (consultation), and that democracy needed conclusive majorities obeyed by those defeated in elections. Training materials embraced politics as a central, not supplementary, part of the movement’s mission, and as a collective religious obligation; governance, they argued, was a “sixth pillar of Islam.” They cited religious examples to argue that good governance brought people closer to God, framing government as a bulwark against moral corruption in society and, therefore, essential to the Islamic project. This framing of electoral politics as a means to a religious end was effective in cementing organisational commitment to politics, yet limited the elaboration of a more pluralistic political project. The movement leadership emerged from this period optimistic that full electoral liberalisation could offer further benefits, yet unconvinced of the need for comprehensive internal reform to achieve the next threshold of majority-seeking.

While others have posited that religious ideology was unexpectedly “sticky” in the MB’s adaptation to electoral politics, I argue that this stickiness was not because religious matters were immune to reform in the movement’s ideology: rather it was due to a particular formative adaptation that persisted due to its functionality for repeated electoral experiences, and that shaped future paths of ideological and organisational adaptation for the movement. The lessons of pre-2011 adaptation formed a lens through which MB saw the opportunities of the post-2011 period.

**Political opportunity structure, field and MB responses February–November 2011**

The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak via mass protests in early 2011 and subsequent transition to free elections presented the MB with dramatically new political opportunities, necessitating important strategic, organisational and ideological choices. The MB leadership responded to early anti-Mubarak protests in 2011 cautiously, resisting pressure from younger Brothers eager to join them until the odds of success were high, and cooperating with the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, which had taken over transitional authority, to support a military-guided transitional roadmap that scheduled early parliamentary elections, betting that the group’s organisational resources would allow it to benefit from this opportunity to attain a new electoral threshold.

The MB responded to new incentives as strategically as the literature might have expected: it immediately sought legal political party status, creating the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), but with its popularity as yet untested in truly free elections, it cautiously reached out to and reassured prospective voters. For the first free parliamentary elections in post-Mubarak Egypt, the FJP formed a coalition with non-Islamist parties, and promised to compete in only about half of constituencies to show that its goal was “participation, not domination.” Several allies broke away, and the FJP ran a higher number of candidates following changes in electoral rules, but it retained an inclusive and more technocratic campaign slogan, “Doing Good for Egypt,” instead of the older, more ideological “Islam is the solution.”

**Organisational adaptation**

The MB embraced new freedoms as vitally important to elaborating and harnessing popular energies for the Islamic project, even as its leaders maintained that the movement must be an
instrument of integration rather than one of competition. The MB leadership reoriented the movement’s resources and activities substantially for high-stakes elections. In the summer of 2011, the MB organised camps for young members to explain changes necessary for electoral work and to divide them into separate groups for political vs. preaching work. There was an incipient process of independent party formation: by 2012, the FJP had set up a separate membership and training process, with a shorter trial period to encourage new members – even non-Muslims or uncommitted Muslims – to join. A new curriculum focusing on communication and electoral outreach skills was being developed in 2012–2013. Leaders noted an influx of non-MB members as politically ambitious outsiders sought to benefit from the movement’s political success, stating that the party aimed for 30 percent non-MB members. Electoral work created new paths for promotion: some mid-level MB leaders raised their profile as effective spokespersons, electoral outreach in the provinces allowed youth secretaries new opportunities to prove themselves, and Muslim Sisters, denied formal representation in the Guidance Council despite their importance in campaigning, comprised 25 percent of FJP membership.

Successive large-scale electoral and constitutional referendum campaigns meant that the time and resources of the entire movement were reallocated substantially away from preaching and education, to the point that activists resentfully noted that because of leaders’ preoccupation with politics, there was no tarbiya (religious education) left. In time, this process may have forced the movement to formalise a division of labour, an important step for parties in loosening the ideological stranglehold of parent movements. Yet the party was only nominally separate: cadres were invariably Brothers, canvassers used outreach and distribution networks developed for movement charity work, and status in the movement translated into status in the party.

Debates over party-movement separation also intersected with struggles for organisational control. While deputy supreme guide and de facto organisational head Khairat al-Shater had asserted that electoral outreach could coexist with preaching, youth leaders demanded structural changes for the movement to continue its core tasks while also competing in elections and maintaining pressure for macro-level political reform in alliance with other groups. They called for separating party work from the movement’s traditional preaching mission, and restructuring the movement to be more internally democratic.

Movement leaders treated these proposals as rebellion, reminding youth of the importance of discipline in the movement’s long-term survival, and rejected the separation of a party from the movement as an unacceptable repudiation of the movement’s comprehensive mission. Dissenters were ejected from the MB for threatening its carefully cultivated unity and discipline of organisation and purpose.

I ideological adaptation

New electoral thresholds were framed by the MB leadership as historic opportunities to pursue core goals, maintaining the older movement lens on politics as part of a broader mission of Islamisation. They acknowledged that the Islamic project must be elaborated through a political process, as Islam rather required reaching out to society “so that all the people participate in the developing of their own nahda (renaissance) and that of the ummah (nation) on the basis of Islam.”

MB leaders recognised that political adaptation required internal ideological retraining as well. The leadership introduced a new training curriculum titled “The Art of Working with
Society” in mid-2011 that emphasised social activism and mobilisation, and winning over people with good manners, where older curricula had focused on cultivating good Islamic behaviour; younger members said that it had taught them to apply their preaching skills to the new social and political outreach required for the new era. Yet the curriculum still framed social outreach as an act of religious self-perfection (ihsan), rather than a step towards elaborating an independent political project. Similarly, curricula for leadership training covered organisational skills, managing differences and respecting public property, yet retained a religious reference, with a workshop on youth leadership named after the Prophet’s youngest military commander, and stories from the lives of the Prophet’s companions about sacrificing one’s own material well-being for the poor were discussed as examples of good leadership. Electoral outreach justified in religious terms reduced conflict between message-seeking and power-seeking priorities. Young and mid-level activists saw political activism, like all social activism, as a path for implementing the movement’s religious goals because “the solution won’t come from God – it requires you to do something.” Politics allowed Brothers to build their capacity to do God’s work, particularly by building up “credit” with common citizens; campaigners used Islamic conversion metaphors like “opening up society” to their ideas to describe their mission. Activists argued that pious Egyptian voters could hardly attend to religion while struggling to make a living, so by using politics to give the people a dignified life, the MB would bring them back to Islam. As the first generation of MB parliamentarians had done, younger MB campaigners believed that modelling “good Muslim behaviour” like honesty and self-sacrifice, and showing that good Muslims in positions of authority could improve people’s lives, would further the Islamic cause.

Interpreting dynamic political opportunity structures and the turn to Islamic populism November 2011–June 2013

Strategic adaptation

The presidential election of mid-2012 offered an important test for the MB/FJP’s responsiveness to political opportunity, given that successive electoral cycles are expected to allow a movement to calibrate its strategies for majority-seeking. However, the political opportunity structure it faced was increasingly ambiguous, throwing up challenges on the right rather than incentives to move to the ideological centre, and forcing parties and voters to balance multiple electoral and constitutional priorities simultaneously. As a result, the cost of appealing to religion did not appear higher with successive electoral thresholds as inclusion-moderation had assumed. The unexpected success of the new Salafi Al-Nour party, which came in second behind the FJP in parliamentary elections, forced the MB to focus on its right flank rather than ideologically centrist voters. The FJP read Salafi success in parliamentary elections as confirmation that Egyptian voters favoured more “Islamic” candidates, and a warning that the MB risked losing its position as the premier Islamist movement, and must consolidate its base to win elections. While voters’ explicit preference for candidates who championed shari’a may have signalled trust in Islamists to work for social justice and economic redistribution rather than support for religious goals, the FJP/MB interpreted it as a signal that going “back to the basics” would reap electoral dividends.

Instead of simply promising good governance, then, MB leaders in the 2012 presidential campaign burnished their religious credentials, reminding voters that they had worked for Islam longer than anybody, to fight off Salafi pretensions to being the “candidates of Islam.”
their traditional face-to-face outreach strategy could only reach a limited audience, they also mobilised Islamic populism in media outreach.

The MB leadership framed religious populism as a somewhat distasteful concession to the needs of office-seeking rather than a reflection of core principles. Cadres admitted with embarrassment that electoral promises to apply shari’a contradicted movement doctrine, which emphasised building social justice and equality from the ground up first. However, they argued, the “simple” voter who loved Islam must be won over, and then taught that the Islamic project required broader, comprehensive work; electoral success, in turn, would permit the state to “pave the environment for the real principles and basic pillars of shari’a,” including freedom, economic welfare and justice, and therefore to deliver on the promise of building an Islamic order.52

**Organisational adaptation**

Competition from the Islamist Right threatened the MB’s internal unity as well as its electoral gains: the newly competitive political sphere boosted charismatic independent Islamists who had an avid following among younger Brothers, forcing the leadership to adapt. Ex-Brother turned Salafi candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail campaigned for president on the simple promise to apply shari’a, and was narrowly disqualified, but many younger Brothers privately expressed a preference for him over any official MB candidate.53 The MB’s decision to run a presidential candidate, after previously insisting it would not, was reputedly aimed as much at disciplining its base and preventing defections to other campaigns as at attaining new electoral thresholds.54 The MB candidate Mohammed Morsi’s presidential election campaign in mid-2012 vowed to apply shari’a sooner rather than later, wooed firebrand preachers, including those popular among MB youth, and touted their endorsements.55 Rather than pulling its base to the centre for electoral gain, then, the MB leadership was pulled to the right by both electoral competition and organisational pressure.

The instability of the political field in 2012 also reduced incentives for the MB to court ideologically dissimilar parties. Egypt’s transitional roadmap scheduled constitutional assembly formation between parliamentary and presidential elections, increasing fears among non-Islamist parties that Islamists could convert short-term electoral gains into permanent constitutional influence, and pushing them to weigh the costs of cumulative Islamist victories more seriously. They therefore sent ambivalent signals about cooperation with the MB.

The second round of presidential elections, which pitted Morsi against the old regime candidate Ahmed Shafiq, offered a brief exception to this strategic context: Islamists of all stripes feared repression if Shafiq were to win, and rallied behind Morsi, and non-Islamist parties agreed to back Morsi as the best hope for defending democratic gains, even if their support was conditional on future concessions by Morsi. In the months that followed, the MB catered more to Islamists than to non-Islamists, however, seeing them as more loyal allies.

**Interpreting the “people’s will” and ideological learning, 2012**

Morsi won the presidency in a narrow second-round win, despite a decline in the raw number of votes for the FJP since 2011. This second successive electoral victory had not required significant trade-offs between message-seeking and majority-seeking, and strategic adaptation had, if anything, reinforced the MB’s religious commitments rather than weakening them. Further, the MB/FJP leadership used an older lens of elections as a path to empowering righteous majorities in interpreting the ambivalent lessons of its electoral success. It had capitalised on its parliamentary success to justify an over-representation of Islamists in a new constituent assembly
in early 2012, arguing that the majority could not be held hostage to the “dictatorship of the minority.”\textsuperscript{56} When the ruling SCAF refused to allow parliament to nominate a government, and the judiciary overturned parliamentary election results due to procedural violations, the MB again framed themselves as defenders of a righteous majority, warning those who crossed them that they were thwarting the “people’s will.”\textsuperscript{57}

The lens of righteous majoritarianism that the MB had developed in prior electoral experience also informed how it perceived its mandate in constitution-writing. The MB and their Islamist allies proposed and defended religiously inflected provisions such as articles that enjoined the state to uphold the morals and religious character of the Egyptian family, and made all subsequent laws subject to the limits of “morality” as in line with a religious-democratic mandate: these articles would defend Egyptians against international treaties signed by unelected leaders that violated popular religious commitments.\textsuperscript{58} Under pressure from Salaﬁs in the assembly to introduce more robust protections for \textit{shari’a}, the MB leadership introduced a provision for the religious review of laws by the oﬃcial Al-Azhar religious institution. Still, all MB oﬃcials insisted that they did not seek to enact religious rules except by the “people’s will.”\textsuperscript{59}

When secular parties and leaders, alarmed by Islamist majoritarianism, began to withdraw from the constituent assembly in protest by mid-2012, MB leaders framed them as a disloyal minority of Christians and secularists conniving with the old regime.\textsuperscript{60} As secularists increasingly called for military intervention in 2013, top MB politicians accused “brothers in opposition … and in religion, and in the nation, and in the revolution” of trying to overturn the results of democracy by supporting Morsi’s removal.\textsuperscript{61}

Lessons of electoral experience and responses to military intervention

The incentives of new electoral thresholds did not force the MB to reconsider or trade oﬀ ideological and electoral priorities, but were easily interpreted to reaﬃrm older Islamist understandings of politics as part of a wider project to revive religious righteousness. In demonstrations against a threatened (and ultimately realised) military coup against the Morsi government at Raba’a al-Adaweya square, pro-MB speakers aligned democracy with Islamist goals, pitting opposition “thuggery” against the Islamists’ protection of “\textit{shara’iyya}” (with a dual connotation of political legitimacy and religious lawfulness), insisted they spoke for the “Egyptian people,” who had demanded “God’s law” as well as bread, freedom, and social justice in the 2011 uprising.\textsuperscript{62}

Repression may have pushed the Brothers in an accommodationist direction before 2011, but the military-led coup against the Morsi government and subsequent ban on the MB in the summer of 2013 fuelled moral outrage and called electoral engagement into question. That violent repression discredits political participation is hardly surprising, though repression in contexts where movements had continuing incentives to woo new constituencies has often had moderating effects.\textsuperscript{63} Yet several MB activists, while sceptical about the benefits of future democratic participation, did weigh the costs and beneﬁts of electoral experience in a way that acknowledged several adaptive possibilities. The lessons they drew from short-lived success at the majority- and oﬃce-seeking thresholds did not increase appreciation for alliance-seeking that inclusion-moderation might expect, but rather conﬁrmed pre-existing perspectives on politics as part of a macro Islamic project: the new era had offered Islamists an opportunity to reorganise society more justly, but they had not been as “revolutionary” as circumstances required.\textsuperscript{64} Some said their leaders had been mistaken to work with old regime institutions, seeking “superficial political solutions” instead of the deep social transformation demanded by
Egyptians. Some saw the true “revolutionary” approach as one in which the MB took on the mandate for comprehensive change alone, even by antagonising others, arguing that the events of 2013 had shown that compromise didn’t pay, and the MB should have openly challenged the army and old regime elite from the beginning. By being accommodationist, youth leaders argued, the MB had emboldened opposition parties to demand representation in an MB-led cabinet, against established democratic norms, and allowed non-Islamists to unfairly discredit the Islamist government.

Activists generally saw compromise-oriented politics as having served the movement poorly: as support became conditional on political performance, the Brothers lost “credit” in society, and their compromises and sacrifices did little to advance the goals of an Islamic polity. Further, alliances with new Islamists parties with their own projects for Islam meant that the MB had to answer for their errors, and for promises they could not fulfil. Some activists saw the events of 2012–2013 as confirming the old movement precept that the state could not be Islamic before society was adequately educated. By the end of the electoral experiment, the MB was divided between those impatient with the leadership’s inability to use electoral success to advance Islamisation, and those who believed an excessive focus on politics had weakened the core religious mission. The benefits of participation were therefore weighed against long-term religious goals, and political learning focused on achieving religious goals rather than strategising differently to draw new support.

The effects of political learning: ideology, strategy, organisation

Ideology

Multiple cycles of electoral participation did not force the MB to abandon message-seeking in favour of majority-seeking, in part because its message was more an ethic meant to be applied in new arenas – defending righteousness, empowering pious individuals, enacting good Muslim citizenship – than a clear set of policy goals, and in part because its leaders used the lens of righteous politics to absorb electoral work into the obligations of religious outreach. Majority-seeking and electoral competition strengthened the movement’s identity as the premier defender of Islam in Egypt, and the overthrow of an MB president revived older religious narratives that combined themes of righteous resistance to oppression with those of democratic legitimacy.

Exclusionary ideological discourse became more prominent in MB ranks following the coup and subsequent crackdown on the movement: reports in 2013 suggested that the works of Sayyid Qutb, a radical Nasser-era ideologue who declared un-Islamic rulers apostates, were regaining currency amidst renewed disenchantment with politics, and the language of sin re-emerged to describe participation in an illegitimate political order. A more fundamental ideological debate within the movement concerned the value of appealing to “the people” and working through “the state.” Some factions argued that overthrowing the corrupt regime in order to return Egypt to “legitimacy” must be a priority. This position was supported by an international committee of Muslim scholars, but strongly opposed by exiled leaders who cited the moderation and patience that had protected the MB over the decades, and urged members to be “revolutionary” through nonviolent resistance and outreach to other political groups.
**Political learning and accommodationist vs. revolutionary strategy**

MB factions took conflicting lessons on mass outreach versus a vanguard strategy from the experience of 2011–2013. Some leaders favoured continuing popular outreach, whether for revolutionary ends or organisational rebuilding. A 2014 FJP statement argued that the Egyptian coup must be reversed so as to return the state to its rightful and sovereign owners, the people, insisting that the Brothers had won the trust of the people in the past and must continue to address God’s truth to them.\(^73\) Some younger Brothers questioned the value of political outreach amidst widespread social rejection and mass arrests, but disagreed on what strategy the group should adopt next.\(^76\)

Several cadres asked how Islamic reform would be served by sacrificing “just to be part of a state that was based on oppression, coercion, entitlement, and seeking personal gain.”\(^77\) But even among rejectionists, there was disagreement on whether to prioritise gradually rebuilding a vanguard organisation or to immediately confront the state.

Factions of MB youth openly challenged the traditional leadership’s statements by 2014–2015. As organisational discipline weakened, movement messaging was fragmented by local initiatives.\(^78\) “Revolutionary” youth wings and Islamist-sympathetic television preachers, including those on MB-founded channels, began calling for “retaliation” against state violence.\(^79\) A tract issued by a self-described, informally organised MB “\(\text{\textit{sharia}}\) committee” in early 2015 titled “Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup” cited scriptural justifications for armed resistance to the state as part of a historic struggle against the “enemies of Islam” and a religious-legal (\(\text{\textit{shari’i}}\)) duty.\(^80\) Yet this committee also attributed the current regime’s illegitimacy to the fact that it had not achieved power through free elections, echoing the fusion of religious and majoritarian notions of legitimacy evolved through electoral experience.\(^81\)

The MB’s remaining senior leadership continued to be responsive to political opportunities even as its horizons changed: it was reluctant to openly support violence that could hurt its public image and achieve little against a powerful state, but could neither credibly offer followers political rewards nor apply organisational discipline to enforce nonviolence.\(^82\) As repression increased, the leadership called on Egyptians to “rise in revolt” to defend their homeland and to take on “injustice and tyranny.”\(^83\) An MB-affiliated religious scholar attempted to reconcile revolutionary anger with traditional movement principles by affirming that Banna had accepted the need for different kinds of power to achieve movement goals, led by the power of faith but extending to force, argued that the new situation required new efforts, thinking and methods, and used the Islamist tenet that God’s law was above all tyrants to argue that the Brothers had an obligation to confront the new illegitimate regime until victory or martyrdom.\(^84\)

**Organisation**

If the MB leadership successfully resisted pressures for more internal democracy in order to run disciplined election campaigns, organisational discipline was impossible to maintain after the coup and crackdown on the MB organisation that followed. With most of the top leadership in jail or in exile, the remaining leaders were pressured by youth to hold new internal elections in February 2014, which installed youth cadres in most leadership positions.\(^85\) As the old guard failed to reassert control ultimately leading to a leadership split in May 2015, the new leadership favoured decentralisation, and decisions were increasingly driven by local circumstances and in coordination with non-MB Islamists. More grassroots input led the MB in a less, not more, accommodationist direction – young activists scorned the trust their older leaders had had in the Egyptian deep state and older leaders worried about the pull that more radical Islamist
organisations might exert on young activists. As the movement developed separate domestic and exiled leaderships targeting Egyptian and international audiences respectively, the political arenas it worked in and therefore the incentive structures that would guide its future development, multiplied. This marked the end of a unified movement confronting the single target of the Egyptian state that had prevailed for 40 years.

The MB today and implications for inclusion-moderation theory

The MB case confirms the responsiveness of religious movement-parties to electoral incentives and overall political opportunity structures. It challenges the assumption, however, that parties will be forced to trade off expressive or movement-centric goals for more pragmatic constituency-focused ones, by showing that multiple pathways of adaptation, even at the majority-seeking threshold, can be functional under different circumstances: Islamic populism was as functional as centrist alliance-seeking at key electoral junctures, for instance.

While inclusion-moderation theory assumed that political opportunity structures would offer cumulative, stable incentives to downplay religious goals in favour of political ones, the incentives of the electoral field and strategies of other parties in Egypt in 2011–2013, notably an Islamist-populist challenge from the right and an Islamist vs. non-Islamist polarisation that revived suspicions of anti-Islam conspiracies, offered ambiguous incentives for majority-seeking. Just as importantly, the path that the MB chose from among functional alternatives at new electoral thresholds was strongly influenced by its core religious-organisational mission, which formed a lens through which it weighed choices at subsequent electoral thresholds: for example, the threat of Salafi outflanking on “Islamic” issues was more serious than the possible gains from allying with non-Islamist parties, and a political-religious understanding of legitimacy shaped its perception of political opposition as an anti-Islam conspiracy. Because adaptation did not entail dropping older goals so much as reconfiguring the means by which they could be achieved, and because democratic incentives were inconsistent, the MB’s political learning process was not as linear as inclusion-moderation theorists had assumed it would be.

Inclusion-moderation theory expected that successive electoral thresholds would push movements to become institutionally specialised and compartmentalised, with an increasingly dominant political cadre driving further change. Yet because the integrity of the movement was uncertain and remained a priority for the leadership through these years, an “organisation-first” mindset persisted through all electoral thresholds despite the evolution of a political cadre, and the parent movement retained control of the new political party. The most important organisational change triggered by majority-seeking could be seen in base-leadership relations: as the potential rewards of politics and the proportion of the base involved in it expanded, the cautious accommodationism of the previous small cadre of MB politicians gave way to a wider, less predictable range of views, including demands for concrete religious policies. Greater internal democracy does not necessarily produce moderating pressures in religious movement-parties, as Tezcur and Jaffrelot have observed elsewhere. An increasingly impatient and empowered youth base pressured the MB leadership to take more conciliatory and democratic and more openly Islamist positions respectively in the post-2011 period. The leadership sidelined reformists early in 2011, but had to cater to more religiously militant youth because of Islamist outflanking, in an example of what Brocker and Kunkler call “simultaneous moderation and immoderation processes” in party evolution.

Does the MB’s trajectory and its importance as the premier Islamist movement-party in the Middle East critically undermine inclusion-moderation theory? The analysis above shows that strategic adaptation can occur without being comprehensive or irreversible along all dimensions. The leadership’s success in absorbing electoral politics into its core religious mission both
allowed it to engage in politics without serious internal dissent and prevented it from making key trade-offs that would facilitate further adaptation. This case also highlights the difficulty of assuming that office-seeking forces movements to down grade other goals, showing that mission-seeking and expressive goals can be incorporated into adaptive mechanisms instead of being jettisoned for political ends. Further, the MB’s experience points to the difficulty of achieving the incremental feedback outlined in inclusion-moderation theory in most contexts of actual democratic transition and dynamic political fields.

The shift from outsider status to a (much contested) party of government and back to outsider status will continue to shape the MB’s adaptation. The movement’s fragmentation following the 2013 is significant: factions within the MB took different lessons from the movement’s experience depending on their age, place in the hierarchy, and location in Egypt or in exile. Most rejected an immediate return to electoral politics, some favoured violence and others a slow rebuilding of the movement, but all remained invested in achieving political change. Some leaders are reportedly undertaking “comprehensive reassessments” of the MB’s work including a potential separation of political and religious functions, framed as a kind of necessary “self-examination” to avoid errors that had resulted from the “overlap of preaching and partisanship” in the post 2011 period. As scholars of Islamist movements in Tunisia and Morocco have argued, however, movements are likely to retain internal diversity and their evolution to be shaped by a more complex set of political variables than we have traditionally presumed, even after electoral success, and transformations of movements into parties are neither inevitable nor irreversible.

**Notes**

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18. Hamzawy and Brown, “A Boon or a Bane for Democracy?,” 52
24. Shehata, “Political da’wa.”
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31 Brown, When Victory is Not an Option, Ch. 3.
32 al-Shater, “The Nahda Project.”
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34 Interview, AB, Cairo, September 2013; Interview, HAM, November 23, 2013.
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