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Bounded Rationality and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Maximisation of Self-utility or Public Interest

by *Hakim Khatib*

Political rationality as a theory is important in its own right. Government leaders must calculate political costs such as the resources needed to generate support for a policy, the implications of a policy decision for re-election, and the possibility of provoking hostility for decisions not well received. Bounded rationality approach has yielded an enhanced understanding of how government organizations may produce unexpected or even unpredicted policy or program results. With public organizations not operating under full rationality conditions, administrators aspiring toward rationality may nonetheless find their goals undermined by a variety of forces, such as informational uncertainties and non-rational elements of organisational decision-making.

Organisational procedures and constraints may come to shape political attitude and decision making at the highest levels. The theory of rationality, as explained by Anthony Downs, claims that individuals in political and governmental arenas are guided by self-interest as they pursue choices with the highest levels of utility. Government officials and political parties, for instance, seek to maximize support from voters. In his article „A theory of the calculus of voting“ for the American Political Science Review, William Riker explained that the focus of political rationality should be on how individuals decide with information available to them, from knowledge of their own preferences or through the consequences of alternatives themselves. Individuals are assumed to act „as if“ they decided according to principles such as utility maximization and the pursuit of self-interest.

Through the criticism of rational choice theory, political science has benefited from the debates over the past few decades to address fundamental issues and questions. John Ishiyama & Marijke Breuning counted a few questions and issues in this regard:

„What drives or motivates individuals or government officials to action? Are they fundamentally self-interested? Or are they capable of placing the public interest over personal, economic- oriented calculations of benefit or utility? What of the impact of social-psychological factors such as emotions, values, and identity? Is the political arena best understood as a venue explained by the basic concepts and tools of economics? Just how much information can political actors handle when making a decision: such as whether to vote for a candidate, align with a political party or ideology, express support for a public policy, or evaluate the performance of government officials?“

Bounded rationality and thick rationality models have emerged to incorporate more developed understandings of rationality in politics and government such as adopting bounded rationality assumptions and paying attention to the impact of institutional or cultural variables such as legislative rules, traditions, family ties and religious beliefs. Thickened version of rationality model, according to several political science scholars, builds additional specifications into the rationality model. For example, actual belief systems, psychological needs, aspiration levels, cultural values, and even specific goals that may be important in the socio-

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political arena.

However, it, arguably, fails to explain, let's say, the political attitudes of Islamist dominated-governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. After the uprisings of 2011 in the MENA region, two Islamist governments have risen in Tunisia and Egypt. The Tunisian one has to share its decision-making with other secular and non-Islamist factions, whereas the Egyptian one has taken a different path.

The sheer control of power and the overwhelming win in presidential as well as parliamentary elections surfaced the polarity instead the plurality and accordingly, the decision-making process was more dictatorial.

The decision-making processes themselves were bounded to the information at hand. This, arguably, is a lack of accurate information based on the inexperience of those who were in leading positions in the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the absence of long-term strategy, led to the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and eventually the removal of Muhammad Morsi, the Islamist president.

In 2011, what drove and motivated the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to be identical to the one the people of Egypt- the removal of the Mubarak regime. However, with the passage of time, this motivation has been compromised. The organisation failed to respond to Egyptian's aspirations.

The Brotherhood acting in place of the government failed to respond to the promises they had made to the people. The leading figures in the Muslim Brotherhood are guided by self-interest as they pursued choices with the highest levels of utility. This maximisation of utilisation has become obvious not only to the other political and military elites, but also to the public of the Egyptian people.

The question remains whether the Muslim Brotherhood was fundamentally self-interested, or were they able to place the interest of Egypt – the public – before theirs. The unfolding events in the Egypt after the Coup d'état by Abdelfattah al-Sissi have shown that the interest of the MB organisation has a priority to this of the Egyptian people.

Probably further research might show that the military is more self interested than the Muslim Brotherhood and the decisions made by the military leaders were not to reflect the will of the Egyptian people, as it was propagated, but on the contrary to maximise their utility and their power, which in other words weakens the opposing Islamist factions including the newly emergent, and still tolerated Salafi political parties.



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