Name of the Scholar	:	Mahboob Thaha
Name of the Supervisor	:	Dr. Hemayun Akhtar Nazmi
Name of the centre	:	Centre for West Asian Studies
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Abstract

Egyptian society is perhaps one of the most influential societies in West Asian region. The reason for this can be attributed to the origin and expansion of different socio-political and intellectual movements. Muslim Brotherhood is one among them which had its origin in Egypt in 1920's. Since then its activities have reached millions of people inside and outside Egypt. Muslim Brotherhood's activities have given them an apt space among the mainstream organizations and movements in Egypt.

The success of Muslim Brotherhood can be related to their involvement in the socio-political arena of Egyptian society. The civil society in West Asian region perhaps is more vibrant and dynamic in Egypt compared to other countries in the region. Though democracy has not been realized completely in the region the presence of a strong civil society has acted as a catalyst in maintaining the struggle for democratization. The continued presence of authoritarian governments with a few exceptions has only caused hurdles to the expansion and development of civil societies in the region.

Egyptian civil societies had begun functioning since 1820s. Though in the beginning they complemented the state apparatus after independence they demanded more freedom from the state. This created a tussle between the civil society's functioning and the state. The state began to interfere in the activities of the civil societies which in turn slowed the democratization process.

Egyptian civil society had gone through different phases in its development. During the time of Muhammad Ali, the modernization process initiated by him provided a platform for the growth of the civil society and it was more of middle class centred. Later on when Egypt came under the colonial control the civil societies focused on protecting the Egyptians from foreign abuse and providing them basic necessities which the colonial powers were unwilling to do for them. The next phase of the development of the civil society can be seen after the Revolutionary Command Council of the Free Officers movement who toppled the King came to power. Though they promised more freedom of activism, the civil society was brought under the control of the government. The administration interfered in the different professional syndicates and imposed their authority. During Anwar Sadath era, the situation became a little better with his declaration of the ODEP (Open Door Economic Policy) and the revival of the multi-party system. But his nature was also a kind of a personalized character by which he tried to consolidate the power and prevent any opposition against him. When Husni Mubarak came to power initially he favoured liberalization without much democratization. Though there was a surge in the number of civil society organizations different revised laws still imposed restrictions on their functioning. The election of a democratically elected government under Muhammed Mursi brought hopes to the civil society groups. But the control of the deep state and the remnants of the old regime still lurking in the administration restrictions were still intact. Things went from bad to worse

after the ouster of Mursi by the military coup and the coming of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to power. The military and the administration had been working continuously to suppress the revolutionary momentum that had come up earlier against Mubarak. This included even putting restrictions on the freedom of press which ended in the detainment of reputed journalists and reporters of international media. Muslim Brotherhood perhaps has taken a high toll in the persecutions executed by the Sisi government against the Egyptians.

The presence of Islamist or Muslim Brotherhood lead civil societies can be mostly seen in the grass-root level of the society. The withdrawal of the government from the public welfare opened the space for Muslim Brotherhood civil society organizations and groups to co-ordinate their activities to this sector. They have effectively answered the call of the distressed and poor for providing the necessary social welfare and services. The success of Muslim Brotherhood in rendering the social services can be attributed to the professionalism and sincerity of their volunteers and cadre. People are very much satisfied with their activities as high quality service is offered at affordable prices and costs.

Muslim Brotherhood's political progress can also be analyzed from the penetration they have among the civil society organizations in Egypt. The grass-root level support and their wide network helped them to garner much votes needed to compete in the elections though they were not free and fair except for the elections held after the ouster of Husni Mubarak. Muslim Brotherhood's openness in the political field can be analyzed as the outcome of the pressure from different corners for the need to reform in accordance with the political and social situations. Their performance in the parliament exhibits their nature of flexibility and gradualism in targeting their goals and objectives. Muslim Brotherhood's coming to power after the ouster of Mubarak was in a way a show of pragmatism though it lacked real political experience.

The civil society aspect of Muslim Brotherhood also explains the wide mobilization it has acquired among the Egyptians. Muslim Brotherhood was seen as a group which worked for the strengthening of the traditional beliefs. At the same time it was seen as a group or organization which acted as an exhaust for the frustrations of the problems of the Egyptian people. The success of Muslim Brotherhood in mobilizing the Egyptians can be analyzed by the political opportunity structure in social movement theory which explains the relation and development of a social movement with its environment. The political situations that came about in Egypt and its neighbouring nations influenced the mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood. Three important political developments can be seen coinciding with the mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood namely British rule in Egypt, illegalizing Wafd party's status and the establishment of the State of Israel. The federated structure of Muslim Brotherhood is another aspect of its mobilization. Muslim Brotherhood was able to bring together people of different interests and spread the message of the organization effectively among them.

The study tries to bring out the Islamic perspective of civil society by highlighting the different historical incidents and trends that prevailed since the time of Prophet Muhammed and his companions to the Ottoman period. The Muslim Brotherhood whose activities and ideology which are based on Islamic principles expose the nature of Islam to act as a catalyst for the nourishment and encouragement of an active civil society in Egypt. They have played a vital role in the development of the civil society and the manifestations of these developments can be seen as the result of the Arab uprisings that occurred in various parts of West Asia.