Hasan al-Banna and the Ikhwan al-Muslimun: How they influence Sayyid Qutb’s Socio-Political Writings?


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ABSTRACT

One of the most well known scholars in Muslim society of the twentieth century was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Throughout the formative phases of Qutb’s life, many figures were responsible for shaping his cultural and intellectual orientation. This paper aims to analyze the influence of Hassan al-Banna into the life of Sayyid Qutb. Results show that Hassan al-Banna was one of the most important figures who were responsible for shaping the life of Sayyid Qutb which resulted in profound changes in his intellectual and political outlook manifested in his socio-political writings.

Key words: Muslim society; Islamic ideologue; Islam

Introduction

Sayyid Qutb was well known intellectual figure in Muslim society. There are numerous well-known figures of the twentieth century who influenced the development of Sayyid Qutb thought. This paper examines the intellectual environment inside Egypt which influenced Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) so much during his formative years and which resulted in profound changes in his intellectual and political outlook manifested in his writings. This paper will, however, focus on Hasan al–Banna, one of the intellectual figures, who regarded as having a strong influence on Qutb’s thought, socio-political issues and Islam whom Qutb clearly mentioned in many of his writings.

Hasan al–Banna was born in the provincial town of al-Mahmudiyya, in the district of Rasheed. He started his early education at the village’s religious school, the kuttab. At the age of twelve he began studying at the Madrasa al-Nizamiyya before attending the Primary Teachers’ Training School at Damanhur. In 1923, he moved to Cairo to complete his studies in education at Dar al- cUlum’s teachers’ college. In 1927, after graduating from Dar al- cUlum, al-Banna began his career as a government teacher in Isma ciliyya province (Shadi, 1994).

During his years at Dar al- cUlum in Cairo, al-Banna appears to have been greatly influenced by the ideas of Muslim modernists such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridha, especially their exposure of the danger of Westernization to Muslim society (Selma Botman, 1987). In describing al-Banna’s life at Dar al- cUlum, Mitchell writes that it enabled him to see “the defection of ‘educated youth’ from the Islamic way of life” (Mitchell, 1998). This new phenomenon facing the Egyptians and the youth in particular, was due to two main reasons: an imitation of the Western way of life and culture on the one side and the lack of the ‘ulama’ role in implanting Islamic awareness in society on the other. The situation worsened in society on the other when there were publicized views of Western educated figures like Taha Hussayn, Muhammad Husayn Haykal and Salama Musa, who saw a religious life to mean backwardness and opposition to a modern civilization (Shadi, 1994).

The continuing social problems facing the country had also caused al-Banna to feel disillusioned with the ‘ulama’ of al-Azhar, who, from his viewpoint, should also be held responsible for all the contemporary problems facing Muslim society. In this regard, they seemed to care more about their personal welfare than promoting the general well-being of the Egyptian Muslims, who were in need of spiritual guidance (Shadi, 1994). There were also among the ‘ulama’ those who chose to co-operate with the current government, considering that such a policy was for the social, political and economic betterment of the Egyptians. As Abu Rabi’ notes, these Muslim religious authorities ‘had allied themselves with the colonists, and this situation
wreaked havoc in the world of Islam... This alliance with the exploiters is just a reflection of their choice of selfish interests and worldly ambition over the welfare of the country and the nation” (I Abu Rabi’, 1996).

These developments gradually created doubts and suspicion in the mind of al-Banna about the efficacy of the al-Azhar to offer even the necessary remedies to the afflicted Muslims. He therefore decided that it was the time to act and establish a new organization capable of meeting the demands of contemporary life. In Isma‘iliyya, al-Banna began to play an active part in the social life of the local community. He gave religious lectures in mosques and schools, explaining to the local community about the existing problems facing the Muslim Ummah and later asking them to return to Islam as the way of life. During this time, he also became aware of foreign infiltration, such as the British military camp and the Suez Canal Company that was wholly owned by foreigners (Mitchell, 1998). The very presence of these foreigners, in his view, drove Muslim people away from Islam and colonized their minds with the Western way of life. This could be considered among the major factors that led al-Banna to establish the Ikhwan al-Muslimun in 1928, with the aim of instilling the truth, propagating Islam as a faith and an ideology and disseminating Islamic knowledge throughout Muslim society. Up to the present day, the movement become one of the largest Islamic movements and is the largest political opposition organization in many Arab states. For instance, by the end of World War II, the Ikhwan al-Muslimun had an estimated two million members. Its ideas had gained supporters throughout the Arab world and influenced other Islamist groups with its “model of political activism combined with Islamic charity work”. The the Ikhwan al-Muslimun’s credo was and is, “Allah is our objective; the Quran is our law, the Prophet is our leader; Jihad is our way; and death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations.”

In 1932, al-Banna, who was now the supreme leader of the Ikhwan, moved to Cairo, where his personality and religious commitment attracted both lower and middle class people. His message was that Islam was both a religion and a universal faith with a strong sense of ideological mission. In a short time, as Botman points out, al-Banna successfully developed a political organization that posed a great challenge to the secular government and directly opposed Western standards of behaviour (Botman, 1987). From the 1930s to the 1940s the Ikhwan was particularly strong. Besides taking part in demonstrations and protests against the existing authority, the Ikhwan also joined the Arab forces in the war between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It is important to note that the strength and popularity of the Ikhwan during these years were very much due to the personality of its founder, al-Banna. The assassination of al-Banna in 1949 sent the organization underground for several years (Botman, 1987).

Qutb’s development of thought can be traced through three important stages. The first stage began with his literary work, in which he became a well-known literary critic between 1926 and 1948. Later on, from 1948 to the early 1950s, he moved from literature to social criticism of the basic contradictions in Egyptian society, which he aspired to resolve. He found that Islam was the only solution to his country’s socio-political problems and struggled, together with the Ikhwan, against the existing order until his imprisonment in 1954. The third stage began in prison and ended with his execution in 1966. He finally emerged as an Islamic ideologue whose main concern was to see human society under an Islamic government. To this end he produced a more radical and open criticism of those in authority. In his view, the lives of Muslims were no longer Islamic. Terms like jahiyyah, jihad and the establishment of the Islamic society (al-mujtamac al-Islami) and state (dawlah) occupied most of his discussions. Qutb’s emphasis on those ideas perhaps reflects his personal ordeal of imprisonment and death sentence.

Despite a large number of studies conducted to explore Sayyid Qutb’s thought and his influence on various aspect of Muslim thought in recent years, the nature of the intellectual environment inside Egypt which influenced Sayyid Qutb’s thought, in particular that related to the Ikhwan movement and its founder still require further investigation. There have been very few studies that addressed issue on when and how al Banna’s influences gradually attracted Sayyid Qutb to join the movement since both never met each other until al-Banna’s death. To fill the gap, this paper therefore aims to analyze the intellectual environment inside Egypt which influenced Sayyid Qutb’s thought manifested in his later writings.

Material and Method

Data for this article is based on the qualitative study conducted using content analysis approach. Content analysis approach is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. In this study an analysis on Hassan al-Banna’s thought and his influence upon Egyptian society and Sayyid Qutb’s socio-political writings is conducted based on the available literatures. Many literatures discussed the relevance of Hassan al-Banna on Sayyid Qutb’s thought. They include a work on Hasan al Banna’s understanding of Islam as a way of life (Mitchell, 1993), his activities within the Ikhwan movement (Lia Brynjar, 1998), and his views on political and economic issues to which the application of Islamic socio-political doctrine should be fully understood and could not be disregarded (Mitchell, 1993). In this paper, Qutb’s main thought and themes on the above issues resulted from al Banna’s thought and influence are discussed under relevant headings. Selection of Hassan al-Banna as an important figure for discussion of
Sayyid Qutb’s socio-political development is important as the man touted as leader that can significantly influence the early development of Sayyid Qutb’s thinking his joining to the Ikhwan movement.

Results and Discussion

Muslim figure and thinker:

Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) was considered as one of the important Muslim figures during the formative phase of Islamic resurgence in the modern Arab world in general and Egypt in particular. His ideas and contribution to the debate of the Islamic revivalism in the 1920s, as Abu Rabi’ writes, “must be understood as that of a religious-minded and rising middle-class intellectual of the Third World labouring under the impact of cultural Westernization and political weakness at home” (I. Abu Rabi’, 1996).

The influence of al-Banna and his Ikhwan on Qutb’s Islamic thought was considerable, especially in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. This was the period when Qutb changed his career from that of a literary man into a committed Muslim writer and thinker who devoted the rest of his life to Islam with his writings and direct participation in the Ikhwan. More importantly, Qutb also changed his secular lifestyle to one based on Islam, which he followed till his death in 1966. There are many similarities between al-Banna and Qutb. Both were born in 1906, both grew up in religious families, graduated from Dar al-‘Ulm, served as government teachers in their early careers and devoted their lives to Islam till their tragic deaths. Al-Banna was assassinated in 1949 and Qutb was executed in 1966 (Shadi, 1994). The difference between both figures is that Qutb’s commitment to Islam began in the late 1940s. This means that he was still immersed in the world of literature, defending his mentor al-‘Aqqad against other literary figures, whereas al-Banna had already established and was participating in various Islamic reform societies such as the Society of Moral Behaviour (Jam’iyyat al-Akhlaq al-Islamiyya) and the Society for the Prevention of the Forbidden (Jam’iyyat Mar’ al-muharramat). It was the personality of al-Banna and the Ikhwan that contributed to Qutb’s orientation to Islam. This can be seen from Qutb’s dedication in his first Islamic work, al-‘Adala:

To the youngsters whom I see in my fantasy coming to restore this religion anew like when it first began...fighting for the cause of Allah by killing and by getting killed, believing in the bottom of their hearts that the glory belongs to Allah, to His Prophet and to the believers...To those youngsters whom I do not doubt for a moment will be revived by the strong spirit of Islam from past generations to future generations in the very near future (Qutb, 1949).

Though writers like Khalidi and Musallam have the view that the dedication was not for Ikhwan members because Qutb was still taking an independent path during 1948, it could still be regarded as a hint of his interest in joining the organization. This is because in the years before leaving for America, Qutb had become disillusioned with the existing political parties, which, in his opinion, lacked a constructive policy, aimed at the realization of social justice and the rejuvenation of Egyptian society. In 1945, for example, Qutb wrote in al-Risala that the Egyptian people were in need of new parties having a constructive mentality and more concern for correcting the unequal distribution of wealth through educational policies (Musallam, 1993). Therefore his mention of “youngsters” struggling for the sake of God should be seen as his new Islamic tendency and his pride in an Islamic organization promoting the reform of their society on the basis of Islam. That was why after its publication in April 1949, al-‘Adala was immediately confiscated by the authorities, believing that the book was dedicated to the Ikhwan, which, at that time, was extremely vigorous in its activities against the government (Khalidi, 1994).

The Need to Promote Social Justice:

Although Qutb never met al-Banna, he did follow the news of al-Banna’s activities with the Ikhwan. Moreover, Qutb’s ideas, which appeared in al-‘Adala, were in many ways similar to those which had been argued by al-Banna and the Ikhwan from the 1930s to the 1940s. That was why, upon reading al-‘Adalah, al-Banna stated: “These are our ideas and there is no doubt that its author is one of us” (Shadi, 1994). Qutb’s official association with the Ikhwan began in 1951 after his return from America. In this regard, al-Banna’s personality and his assassination were among the major factors that led him to devote himself to the organization. Upon hearing of al-Banna’s death in 1949, Qutb, who was receiving medical treatment for a health problem in a San Francisco hospital, noticed that the hospital staffs were overjoyed at the news. This experience propelled him in a new direction in his career: the need to associate with the Ikhwan and to co-operate with them with the aim of realizing his ideas of social justice. The appearance of the second edition of al-‘Adalah in 1951 indicated clearly Qutb’s close association with the Ikhwan, for he had changed his dedication to read:

To the youngsters whom I used to see in my fantasy coming but have found them in real life existing...striving for Allah with their possessions and their lives, believing profoundly that glory belongs to Allah and to His Prophet and to the believers (Qutb, 1951)
Qutb’s orientation to the Ikhwan should also be examined within the context of the social and political development of Egyptian society. The continuing social problems in Egypt coupled with the failure of the existing political parties to solve them led Qutb to return to Islam as he did in al-’Adalah. In this regard, Qutb found the Ikhwan had characteristics similar to those which he wished to promote in correcting the social and economic disparity of Egyptian society. As Tripp wrote:

The Ikhwan’s activism, both in the Palestine war and in the attacks on British military installations in the Suez Canal Zone, clearly impressed Sayyid Qutb and led him to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood combined the virtues that he was to extol at length in his later writings (Tripp, 1994).

Conclusion:

The formative phases of Qutb’s life saw the development of his intellectual career and emergence as one of the important Muslim figures of the twentieth century. Throughout those years Qutb’s background, including his upbringing, education and the socio-political conditions of Egyptian society, were responsible for shaping his cultural and intellectual orientation. In addition, the intellectual environment during his years in Cairo was also exceptional, for Qutb appears to have been gradually influenced by names like al-’Aqqad and al-Banna, who contributed to shaping Qutb’s critical basis of thought and his outlook on the social and political situation of his country. The personality of al-Banna and his struggle under the banner of the Ikhwan, which was attempting to present Islam as a comprehensive way of life to the Egyptians, had convinced Qutb of the importance of taking part in Islamic activities to deal with the current problems facing his society. Qutb’s joining the Ikhwan in 1951 was a meaningful moment in his Islamic activism for it enabled him to play a direct role in the political struggle in the country by the Ikhwan, an organized Islamic group. In addition, his association with the Ikhwan enabled Qutb to read and study more on personality of al-Banna and his works, which had a strong influence upon his thought and crystallized his understanding of Islam. Qutb’s role in the Ikhwan’s struggle also proved his sincerity in his calling people to Islam when he began by himself to reform his society, even though this eventually cost him his life.

Reference