THE ISLAMIC REFORM PROJECT NEEDS TO BE "RESUMED"

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I have no need to stress the importance of any discussion about the Islamic reform movement, which is undergoing a revival today as we celebrate the centenary of the birth of the great *mujtahid* (Islamic scholar and interpreter of Islamic Law) Allal al Fassi. The original version of Islamic reform, which first appeared in the 1830s and continued till the early 1920s, offered sober intellectual answers to a wide range of problems[1] following the massive upheavals produced by the rise of modern European civilization and Europe's colonial conquests. Apart from backwardness, these problems included – among others: the challenges posed by the colonial invasions of Arab and Muslim lands; reform and the creation of the modern nation-state; and the

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[1] For more detail of our view see Abd al Ilah Balqaziz: *Al Islam wa'l Siyasah*, Beirut, Casablanca, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, 2nd impression, 2008, and Abd al Ilah Balqaziz and Ridwan al Sayyid: *Azmat al Fikr al Siyasi al 'Arabi*, Damascus, Dar al Fikr, 2001.

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question of *ijtihad* (interpretative judgment) in interpreting the Scriptures in the light of the changing circumstances of the modern age.

The responses to these problems helped Muslims to acquire a more balanced view of the new world in which they found themselves after the final years of the 18th century.

In more recent years Islamic reform – which had originally shown such promising signs of rationalising the Muslims' view of the world, their history and the age in which they lived – has been in the doldrums and is showing signs of losing its way, and this explains why the Muslim world today is flooded with Islamist political-ideological literature which has no intellectual or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) connection with the original reformist legacy.

This "second wave" of Islamic reform – which has been around for some eighty years (for the past fifty years in its most acute form) and seems to regard itself as the sole legitimate "representative" or "spokesperson" of the Faith – is presenting the worst possible face of Islam to Muslims and the world as a whole.

Any discussion of Islamic reform must take these two factors into account – i.e. its promising beginnings, open-mindedness and readiness to exercise *ijtihad*, followed by the dramatic decline in Islamic thought from the second quarter of the 20th century, particularly after the 1960s and 1970s. Although the time period concerned can be calculated in years and decades, in terms of the difference, or distance, between the two modes of thinking it would be more appropriate to reckon it in centuries. (Though in fact it would be even more correct to describe the gap between the reformism of the past and the revivalism of today as a whole era rather than a century.)

As a concept and movement, Islamic reform died in the early 1920s for a number of reasons, some political, others intellectual. The political reasons were due to two major events: firstly, the foreign occupation of the Arab and Islamic countries as a result of European supremacy and the failure of reform efforts in the Arab and Islamic world (Egypt, Tunisia, the

Ottoman State, Morocco and Iran), then the collapse and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The intellectual reasons – and it is these that are of greater concern to us in this discussion – stem from within the Islamic reform movement itself because of the actions of one of its later leaders, Mohammed Rashid Rida. In contrast to the traditional reformists from Rifa'a Rafi' al Tahtawi to 'Abd al Rahman al Kawakibi, who championed the idea of the modern nation-state, Rida strongly defended the principle of the Caliphate[1] in his book *Al Khilafah aw al Imamah al 'Udhma* (*The Caliphate or the Great Imamate*).[2]

The idea of reform through the application of *ijtihad* suffered more than one setback until Sheikh 'Ali 'Abdul Raziq attempted to revive the notion of a connection between religion and politics in Islam[3] that did not posit the existence of a Caliphate in *Al Islam wa Usul al Hukm* (*Islam and the Foundations of Governance*)[4]. In the 1920s the publication of his book rekindled the flames in another region of the Arab world – the Maghreb. While the *ijtihad* initiatives of Taher ben Achour and al Tha'alibi may be seen as a turning point in the way Maghrebi *'ulama* (religious scholars) and thinkers came to regard Islam and the issues of the age, it was the Algerian sheikh 'Abdul Hamid ben Badis and the Moroccan scholar Allal al Fassi who took those initiatives to a higher level. Even so, it would still be correct to describe this reform period in Islamic thought as a "resumption of reform"[5].

The very same ideas that flourished in Islamic reformist circles in the 19th and earlier 20th centuries were reiterated in the "resumed reform" writings of the Arab Maghreb between the 1930s and the 1960s. First and

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1   Abd al Ilah Balqaziz: *Al Dawlah fi'l Fikr al Islami al Mu'asir*, Beirut, Markaz Dirasat al Wahdah al 'Arabiyah, 2nd impression, 2004, pp. 81-101, and Wajih Kawtharani: *Al Dawlah wa'l Khilafah fi'l Khitab al 'Arabi ibban al Thawrah al Kamaliyyah fi Turkia*, Dirasat wa Nusus, Beirut, Dar al Tali'ah, 1996 (*Al Turath al 'Arabi al Mu'asir* series).

2   Mohammed Rashid Rida: *Al Khilafah aw al Imamah al 'Udhma*, Cairo, Matba'at al Manar, 1922.

3   Abd al Ilah Balqaziz: *Al Dawlah fi'l Fikr al Islami al Mu'asir,* pp. 107-117, and – by the same author – *Al 'Arab wa'l Hadathah – Dirasah fi Maqalat al Hadathiyin*, Beirut, Markaz Dirasat al Wahdah al 'Arabiyyah, 2007, pp. 125-145.

4   'Ali 'Abdul Raziq: *Al Islam wa Usul al Hukm*, Beirut, Manshurat Dar Maktabat al Hayat, 1978.

5   Abd al Ilah Balqaziz: *Al Dawlah fi'l Fikr al Islami al Mu'asir.*

foremost among these was the concept of a modern nation-state based upon the principles of liberty, a constitution and a representative system. Like their predecessors in Egypt and the Levant, the Maghrebi thinkers regarded such a state as fully compatible with the teachings of Islam and its principles of governance, such as *shura* (consultation) and *'adl* (justice). While 'Abdul Hamid bin Badis laid the foundations - which implicitly supported the notion of a modern nation-state - with his refutation of the idea that Islam cannot exist in a proper form without a Caliphate,[1] the *fiqh* justification for such a state was based upon Taher ben Achour's[2] and Allal al Fassi's *ijtihad* propositions, which were inspired by a new interpretation of Abu Ishaq al Shatibi's *fiqh al maqasid* ("goals of *fiqh*") in his book *Al Muwafaqat fi Usul al Ahkam*[3] (*Reconciliation of the Fundamentals of [Islamic] Rulings*), and reinforced (particularly by Allal al Fassi) by a new and more open-minded attitude to modern political thought and theories of the state.

Al Fassi's book *Maqasid al Shari'ah al Islamiyyah wa Makarimha*[4] (1964) (*Goals and Virtues of Islamic Law*) contains plenty of evidence of this new approach to *fiqh*, including an enlightened attitude to the history of Islamic jurisprudence and constructive proposals for applying *maqasid* ("*fiqh* goals") to the circumstances of the modern age. In this respect al Fassi – who was a Maliki – did not feel himself under an obligation to side with his own school on every issue, but, in the manner of a true *mujtahid*, frequently opted for the Shafi'i or Hanafi positions on certain questions. At the same time, al Shatibi's *maqasid* and *al kulliyat al khams* ("the five logical predicates") freed him – just as they had freed al Shatibi himself and Muhammad 'Abduh – from the feeling of obligation to follow the *qiyas* (juristic reasoning/analogy) procedures which had dictated the way Islamic *fiqh* thinking operated ever since the era of Imam al Shafi'i in the 2nd century AH (8th century CE); this ensured that he was better able to

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1   Ibid. pp. 117-122.

2   Taher Ben Achour: *Maqasid al Shari'ah al Islamiyyah*, Tunis, Al Sharikah al Tunisiyyah li'l Tawzi', 1978.

3   Abu Ishaq al Shatibi: *Al Muwafaqat fi Usul al Ahkam*, Dar al Fikr (undated).

4   Allal al Fassi: *Maqasid al Shari'ah al Islamiyyah wa Makarimuha*, Rabat, Matba'at al Risalah, 2nd impression, 1979.

apply the criteria of *maslahah* (public interest in the *fiqh* context) and *waqt* (time/era/period) to politics and the system of government and adopt an open-minded approach to the knowledge of his age.

Al Naqd al Dhati [1] (*Self-criticism*) – the weightiest of his writings on reform and *ijtihad* and the work most in tune with his age – was written in 1948 or 1949 and its first print edition appeared in 1952. In this book al Fassi sought to define his vision of the ideal society of the future and offer a practical guide as to how that society could be established under the guidance of the nation's cultural and political elite, who would devise a suitable social and political programme for an independent Morocco. As the scope of his vision was wide-ranging, the book covered an impressive array of intellectual, social, religious, political and economic topics including the individual and the family, social class, political parties and trade unions, the state and religion, freedom and the law, education, personal choices and social awareness, land ownership and the relationship between the state and the economy, women's rights and legislative issues in Islam, identity and adapting to the modern world etc. In other words, his vision gave equal weight to both society and the state.

However, his most significant writings were his acute and highly perceptive works on reason and *ijtihad* which reflected his unhesitating readiness to embrace the knowledge of his age and apply it when formulating his theories.

Al Fassi's death in 1974 marked the end of this phase of "resumed reform" which had appeared on the scene after the demise of the first reformist wave in the eastern Arab world at the end of the first quarter of the last century. Meanwhile, the "Islamic revival" – which began with the rise of Hassan al Banna' and the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1920s and appeared in the Maghreb at the precise moment that Allal al Fassi died - was able to benefit from the decline of reformism, traditional Sunni Islam and the scholarly institutions such as al Azhar. In the Maghreb the revivalists also benefited from the demise of the "resumed reform" period and the declining role of the traditional Islamic *'ulama'* and their

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[1] Allal al Fassi: *Al Naqd al Dhati*, Rabat, Manshurat Mu'assasat Allal al Fassi, 8th impression, 2008.

institutions (al Karaouin, Ez-Zitouna, the *'ulama* councils etc.). Moreover, just as there was no relationship or sense of affinity between the revivalism of al Banna' and Islamic reformism, so too was there no connection between the revivalism of 'Abd al Salam Yasin[1] and 'Abbasi Madani and the reformism of Allal al Fassi and 'Abdul Hamid ben Badis. Indeed, the Islamic revivalist movement – in both the eastern Arab world and the Maghreb - declared a break with the reformists – a break which became irreparable when matters deteriorated further during the second half of the 20th century.

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Today, if we try to distinguish between the Islamic reform movement since the 1830s and the Islamic revivalists since the 1930s we will find that the difference between them is essentially one of fundamental character rather than degree. The focus of the reformist position is on the central question that is posed by all its thinkers: How can we move forward? The revivalists, on the other hand, are concerned with the question that most preoccupies their sheikhs, *murshidin* ("guides") and *du'at* ("missionaries"): How can we protect our identity?[2] Each of these questions has a "special nature" – in the Aristotelian sense – and sets in motion trains of thought that lead to different conclusions, judgments and views.

Here we can usefully begin by noting that the question about "moving forward" puts the person who asks it in the position of seeking a way to become part of an era characterised by progress; it is therefore a dynamic, lateral, future-oriented question and quite different in nature from the question about "identity", which is defensive, introspective, retrograde and essentially antipathetic to the changes taking place in the arena in which it is posed. Despite the radical dissimilarity between the two groups' questions, both stem from a common point of reference – that is to say,

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[1] See his criticism of the Islamic reformists, including Muhammad 'Abduh, in 'Abdel Salam Yasin: *Al Islam wa'l Qawmiyyah al 'Ilmaniyyah*, 2nd impression, Tanta, Dar al Bashir li'l Thaqafah wa'l 'Ulum al Islamiyyah, 1985.

[2] Abd al Ilah Balqaziz and Ridwan al Sayyid: *Azmat al Fikr al Siyasi al 'Arabi*, and Ridwan al Sayyid: *Siyasiyyat al Islam al Mu'asir: Muraja'at wa Mutaba'at*, Beirut, Dar al Kitab al 'Arabi, 1997.

Islam, though their visions and goals differ widely. While the reformists are seeking to become very much part of the modern age, but in the name of Islam, the revivalists aim to withdraw from it and take refuge in the past by turning in upon themselves on the pretext of protecting their identity from "dissipation and distortion", also in the name of Islam.

The difference between the two positions is between two interpretations of reality, two attitudes to life and Islamic society and two views of the present and future.

Every problematic question of this kind lays down the parameters of its answer. As far as the reformers are concerned, there can be no progress without access to the exact same tools used by the people who have actually achieved progress – that is to say, the Europeans. And if seeking that goal is permitted (and catered for) in the teachings of Islam and Islam's political and intellectual heritage, then there is nothing to prevent "the Muslims of today" (i.e. the 19th century, when the question was first posited) from adopting the means of achieving it from other nations, even if those nations do not share their faith.[1] However, the revivalists maintain that the only way the *Ummah* (Islamic Nation) can preserve its identity from danger is through a total separation from the source of that danger – that is to say, European civilization and its values. And the only way to achieve that separation is by going back to the "basics" - the past and the heritage - remaining true to them and holding fast to their eternal truths in order to keep the evils of the modern age at bay and reaffirm the Muslim identity by safeguarding its pristine purity. In the reformist discourse, Muslims will only be able to advance when they are able to establish a modern nation-state – a state of justice and liberty with a constitution – and to exercise *ijtihad* in understanding the teachings of their religion; in other words, they should not make those teachings a barrier between themselves and progress, the "laws of life" etc. On the other hand, in the revivalist discourse the only way Muslims can preserve their identity is by establishing an "Islamic State" and applying the Shariah; unless they do

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[1] An idea championed by Khair al Din al Tunisi in *Aqwam al Masalik fi Ma'rifat Ahwal al Mamalik*, 2nd impression, Tunis, Al Dar al Tunisiyyah li'l Nashr; Algiers, Al Mu'assasah al Wataniyyah li'l Kitab, 1986, p. 156.

this, they say, how will it be possible to ensure that the teachings of Islam remain valid for every time and place and protect the Islamic heritage from interpretations that will sow discord and division among Muslims? Where their worldly affairs are concerned, Muslims have no need to draw upon the ideas and practices of other nations.

So here we have two opposing positions. The fact that they have a common point of reference - i.e. Islam - raises the question of why they should come to different conclusions despite having started from the same premise. The fact is, though, that having a common starting-point merely means that, while they share a single religious principle, it is not the kind of principle that is able to generate identical thought processes and approaches to concepts. It is more similar to the general common ground shared by the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'aris despite their fundamental disagreements over questions of scholastic theology – or between the Hanafis and Hanbalis, despite their differences over *usul al fiqh* (fundamentals of *fiqh*), or between *fuqaha* (Shariah jurists) and philosophers, despite their differences over the status of reason in religion, or between Sunnis and Shias, despite the fact that they disagree over the question of the Imamate, etc. We therefore have no alternative but to subject the meaning of the term "starting point" (in Arabic "*marja'iyyah*") to close scrutiny.

We can also cite another piece of evidence to show that a single religious starting point or premise (i.e. Islam) does not necessarily lead to common means and goals. We have seen how the goals of reformist and revivalist activists differ (i.e. nation-state and *Ummah* as the source of authority versus an Islamic State based upon the principle of enforcing the Shariah). However, where the two sides are even further apart is over their vision of the means to be adopted in order to reach those goals. Here it is not a question of a difference or "gap", but rather a clash between two irreconcilable lines of approach. The reformists followed the intellectual approach, writing books and publishing magazines and newspapers with enlightening and informative articles, and formulating political, administrative and educational strategies and proposing them to the ruling political elites. They continued to put their case by promoting

awareness through writing, school educational programmes and the press; at the same time they also engaged in democratic struggle with the aim of establishing freedoms and institutions that would enable society to take part in the political process, determine its own destiny and improve its conditions. If we disregard the 1930s and 1940s, when Hassan al Banna' showed a preference for peaceful political action, during which time he recognized the constitution and took part in elections, we will find that the second generation of revivalists followed a completely different path and resorted to violence in order to achieve their political ends on the grounds that they were fighting a legitimate jihad against the new "*Jahiliyyah*" ("Age of Ignorance")[1] and enforcing Allah's law on earth. When the Islamic movements reverted to peaceful political action and took part in elections again – particularly from the `1980s – the spectre of violence faded, peace and stability were restored and the new generation of the "Islamic Awakening" began to opt for political action as an alternative to armed combat.

This stark difference between the two movements' approaches is due to a number of historical, social and cultural factors. The historical period during which reformism was born and developed (between the 1830s and 1960s) differs significantly from the era which saw the rise of revivalism. The first coincided with the creation of the nation-state, while the second took place during the crisis and failure of the nation-state. The social factors behind the two concepts (reformism and revivalism) and their movements were different too. Reformism is associated with the rise of the middle class and the spread of modern middle-class culture, while revivalism coincided with the collapse of that class's status in the social structure and the growing size of the marginalised social groups[2] as a result of the rise of a perverted form of capitalism which destroyed the agricultural and productive sectors and turned the labour force into a class of poverty-stricken unemployed.

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[1] See Sayyid Qutb: *Ma'alim fi'l Tariq*, 10th impression, Cairo, Beirut, Dar al Shurouq, 1993, and Mohammed Qutb: *Jahiliyyat al Qarn al 'Ishrin*, Beirut, Dar al Shurouq, 1994.

[2] See 'Ali Oumlil: *Al Islahiyyah al 'Arabiyyah wa'l Dawlah al Wataniyyah*, Casablanca, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi; Beirut, Dar al Tanwir, 1985.

Another equally important factor (in addition to history and social environment) is the difference between the two discourses and concepts. Islamic reformism is primarily an intellectual movement, even if it gave birth to the national political movements, while revivalism has always been a party-political movement[1] without an established theoretical basis to underpin its mission. It was only to be expected, therefore, that there should be differences between a religious scholar's or thinker's approach and the means adopted by men with missions, party political activists and fighters

It is clear then that the question of a common "*marja'iyyah*", or starting point, is not as simple as some people may think. Islam is the religious starting point for the entire *Ummah* and all the different trends, tendencies and factions that comprise it. However, it is a creed and not a political concept that everyone can agree upon. If it were, Muslim history would not be marred by schism, conflict and civil wars,[2] so consequently if one considers the "starting points" of the reformists and revivalists, one should think of them in other than religious terms. That, of course, is another issue which it would not be appropriate to examine in detail here.

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It is undeniable that Islamic thought's appalling decline since the 1930s - particularly over the past forty years - has had a major impact on the Islamist political organisations that have embraced the increasingly popular "Islamic Awakening discourse",[3] and it also explains why so many of them are so strongly inclined to use violence for political ends that they are prepared to draw the Arab and Islamic political communities into open conflict and civil war. This leads us to look back nostalgically to the fertile intellectual role played by the Islamic reform movement in the thought of its time and reinforces the feeling that the world of today needs it more

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[1] Abd al Ilah Balqaziz: *Al Dawlah fi'l Fikr al Islami al Mu'asir*, pp. 264-274.

[2] Henri Laoust: *Les Schismes dans l'Islam*, Paris, Payot, 1965.

[3] For detailed information about extremist and violent groups see Rif'at Sayyid Ahmad: *Al Nabi al Musallah*, London, Riad El-Rayyes li'l Kutub wa'l Nashr, 1991. Two parts – Part 1 *Al Rafidhun*, Part 2 *Al Tha'irun*.

than ever as a true, civilized, radiant expression of Islam – the faith that is currently being perverted in the name of religion.

This nostalgia is not inspired by the despair and frustration that have been so prevalent ever since Islam was hijacked by political groups that claim a monopoly of it and assert that they alone have the right to speak in its name. Rather, its inspiration comes from a "historical intellectual and social necessity" which needs to be satisfied.

It is a "necessity" in at least two senses: "defensive" or "tactical", in order to respond to attacks on Islam which claim it is a religion that calls for violence and hatred and is so bigoted and certain of its beliefs that its followers are unable to see non-Muslims objectively and benefit from their progress; and "strategic", so that it can take *ijtihad* to its logical conclusion after freeing it from the dogmatism that encumbers it, and in doing so provide Muslims with the intellectual, political and social tools they need in order to open up opportunities for progress.

Needless to say, Islamic reformism's intellectual legacy lacks the means to satisfy these two "necessities".

For some time there have been people calling for a new, "streamlined" kind of reform in response to the discouraging and gloomy situation we have described. This is certainly apposite and, while we accept it without many reservations, we should like to reformulate one or two minor aspects of it and reassert its links with its historical origins. For example, instead of calling for a new reform movement, we should prefer to say that there is a need for a "resumption" of the Islamic reform project which came to a halt with the death of the last of its champions - Allal al Fassi (d. 1974) - because in our view "resumption" is a better way of describing what we are seeking when we talk about Islamic reform.

Why "resumption" rather than a search for something new and different?

There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, while the call for a new reform is a must, the conditions for achieving it may not always exist just because there is a desire or a will for it. Secondly, the idea of "resumption"

is justifiable on historical grounds, since, although the process of Islamic reform began nearly two centuries ago, it is still incomplete and the use of a term like "resumption" will indicate that the original concept is not in serious danger of being aborted.

Let us explain this briefly.

Until further notice, the "Islamic concept" is still bound by the parameters that the Islamic reformist discourse first laid down in the 19th century; that is to say, the use of *ijtihad* for understanding the Scriptures and reinterpreting them in response to changing realities, and also in order to understand the real world from an open-minded Islamic angle. It can in no way be said that *ijtihad* has served its purpose and there is no longer any need for it, so therefore we can leave the age of reform behind us. *Ijtihad* is able to deal with new developments and events, though at the present time it has been stifled, so that those who turn to the texts and wording of the Scriptures today use them as a barrier to isolate themselves from the world and the need for progress. This is more in evidence today than ever before, so there is a greater need than ever for *ijtihad* to be resumed and the obstacles to it to be lifted.

This is one point. The second point is that the social and political programme offered by the Islamic reform project over the past 180 years has not been achieved, so it cannot be said that there is no longer any need for it.[1] Moreover, as it has not proved to be faulty in any way, there is no reason for us to call for a "new reform". If we look at its goals we will find that the three most important ones are: spreading education through a national school system, carrying out religious reform and creating a modern nation-state – a state with freedoms, a constitution and institutions.

Even today we can clearly see that the Arab nation – now as well as in the future - depends upon these goals for its renaissance and in order to free itself from the backwardness that has plagued it throughout its recent history. Not only have those goals not been achieved; in fact, the material

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1 *Al Mashru' al Nahdhawi al 'Arabi*, Markaz Dirasat al Wahdah al 'Arabiyyah, Beirut, 2010.

and intellectual obstacles to their achievement are even greater now than they were in the past. Today, after a century and a half of striving to create an effective, modern educational system, what does Islamic reformism find? The collapse of that system, rising illiteracy, and a "mass invasion" of foreign educational institutions that operate through a foreign language medium. Religious reform – in which Muhammad 'Abduh rebutted the idea of a religious authority in Islam and asserted that the only authority should be civil – today finds itself up against increasing calls for a merging of politics, state and religion and the creation of an Islamic State subject to Shariah Law. The nation-state, which the reformists envisaged when they championed the notions of liberty, constitutional government, a representative system and the separation of powers, is today seen as a failure, replaced by a form of despotism in which government has become the preserve of small, exclusive elites and other influence groups.

This great project – Islamic reform – has not been achieved, so it cannot be said to have run its course or outlived its usefulness. Nor has it shown itself to be defective, so consequently there is no need for a new, alternative version of it. What is required is a "resumption", not a new movement. However, its problem is that it is waiting for a "hero" to lead it and at present no such "hero" exists. Instead, his place is filled by marginalised "stand-ins".

Reform cannot take place without reform activists, and the reform project cannot be accomplished without a political vehicle that will enable it to achieve tangible success.