THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN EGYPT: HURDLES ON THE WAY TO POWER

The Muslim Brotherhood is believed by many to be poised to become a major player in post-Mubarak Egypt. However, since the revolution, the group has had to face significant challenges. Internally, it has seen several prominent members leave its ranks. Externally, it has been dealing with the competition coming from the Salafist movement. However, although both dynamics represent a challenge, they are unlikely to prevent the Brotherhood from obtaining good results in the forthcoming elections. Given the fluidity of the situation, the West should adopt a policy of low-profile engagement with the Brothers.

About to become a major political player in post-Mubarak Egypt? Leading representatives of the Muslim Brotherood at a press conference, Cairo, 30 November 2010.   REUTERS / Amr Dalsh

The January 2011 revolution has brought Egypt into uncharted territory. The country – provisionally governed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a body of 20 senior military officers – seems to be destined for the first time in its history to have an authentically democratic political system. Parliamentary and presidential elections are due to take place in the months to come, and Egyptian society is swept by a mix of excitement and apprehension at this new phase of its history.

Among the many political forces seeking to play a role in the tumultuous post-Mubarak period, the Muslim Brotherhood has been scrutinised in particular. Since its foundation in 1928, the Brotherhood has sought to steer Egyptian society towards a more conservative and all-embracing brand of Islam governing all aspects of private and public life, which it regards as the antidote to alien and negative Western political and cultural influences. The group's public message has traditionally called for the establishment of an Islamic state from below, a slow process that sees the creation of a purely Islamic system of government as the natural consequence of the peaceful Islamisation of the majority of society. Over time, it has somewhat adapted its views, and many of its leaders currently claim to seek only "a civic state with an Islamic frame of reference". In order to do so, the Brotherhood has established a capillary structure of mosques, professional organisations, charities, and social services that has allowed the group to spread its views to millions of Egyptians. Its message has also inspired Islamist movements worldwide, and today the Brotherhood is also an informal global ideological movement.

Since its inception, however, segments of the Brotherhood have sought to use force to achieve their goals, and their actions led to periodic confrontations with the Egyptian state. The group was almost wiped out during the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who harshly persecuted its members. Whereas one section of the Brotherhood chose a direct confrontation with the government, by the late 1960s, several leaders of the organisation began to publicly eschew violence against the regime and focused on grassroots efforts to spread their message. Although never officially allowed to operate as a formal organisation, the Brotherhood established a modus vivendi with the government and participated in Egypt's social and political life until the fall of Hosni Mubarak.

Internal fissures

The Brotherhood was only belatedly and marginally involved in the protests that toppled the Mubarak regime. Nevertheless, while the liberal activists who led the protest movement have been so far unable to unite and translate the enthusiasm of the revolution into a viable political force, the Brotherhood seems to have quickly gained ground. In April, it formed the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and, through it, it will be openly participating in elections for the first time in its history. Although opinion polls in the country are

unreliable, it is commonly believed that the Brotherhood will be able to capitalise on its superior political experience and grassroots influence and make significant gains in the elections.

On the other hand, the formation of the FJP also seems to have triggered tensions within the Brotherhood. Several prominent Brothers disobeyed the group's leadership's order not to join any party other than the FJP and formed their own political entities. Senior Brotherhood members like Ibrahim al-Zafarani and Mohammed Habib formed the al-Nahda Party, while Brotherhood youths who had been active in the revolution formed al-Tayyar al-Masri and other minor entities. Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh, another prominent Brotherhood leader, announced his candidacy for presidency and recruited several Brotherhood activists to run his campaign.

The Brotherhood's leadership has been inflexible and has expelled all members who defied its orders. These unprecedented tensions have led some observers to argue that the Brotherhood is in turmoil, plagued by internal dissensions that could lead to its collapse. Moreover, it has led many to wonder whether the activists who formed these entities have done so because of ideological differences with the Brotherhood or simply because they were dissatisfied with its internal bureaucracy.

In reality, the revolution has accentuated resentments that had simmered for years. Paramount among the fissures that characterise the Egyptian Brotherhood, like any political movement, is the generational conflict. The group is dominated by an aging leadership of those who survived the persecutions during the Nasser era. This leadership exercises its power in largely non-transparent ways. Its power is challenged by the mid-management, individuals in their late forties and fifties who joined the Brotherhood as student leaders and who are struggling to advance in the organisation. Finally, there is the party youth, which encompasses young professionals in their thirties and twenty-somethings who are extremely active online and participated in the revolution.

There is no question that there are some ideological differences between the old leadership and the younger generations. The former tends to adopt extremely conservative positions, while most younger militants embrace views that are more in

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line with the intellectual evolution that Islamism has undergone during the last 20 years. Still, it is apparent that the core of the contention is purely over management, as ambitious and competent younger activists are increasingly frustrated at seeing their careers inside the group decided by the obscure maneuverings of an octogenarian leadership elected through murky processes.

Moreover, three concurring reasons can be identified to explain why it is premature, if not outright incorrect, to see these fissures as a massive rebellion of the youth leading to a fragmentation of the Brotherhood. The first is that most of the new political forces created by former Brotherhood activists stand little chance of gaining traction among the Egyptian electorate. Most of them are virtually unknown to the greater public and lack the massive resources and pool of grassroots activists the Brotherhood possesses. Their party platforms are full of platitudes and differ little from the FJP's equally vague platform. It seems unlikely that the average Islamist or religiously conservative voter would prefer these new, untested entities over the Brotherhood's long-established brand name.

Moreover, personal considerations also influence the decisions of many frustrated Brotherhood activists. The Brotherhood is not simply a political movement, but for its members is their entire life. It is not uncommon for members to come from Brotherhood families, undergo five to eight years of training before being formally admitted to it, marry within the group, obtain a job through its network, and spend their free time in small locally-based Brotherhood learning groups. It is likely that many

members prefer to express their criticisms in timid internal discussions rather than being expelled and face a major disruption in their personal lives.

Finally, there are signs that the group is making efforts to make its internal mechanisms more transparent. Brotherhood leaders argue that it was the very same hierarchical and secretive structure that is now under criticism that allowed the group to survive 60 years of repression. The regime was only removed a few months ago, the Brotherhood is still technically illegal, and nobody really knows how the political situation will evolve even in the near future. It would be unfair, senior Brothers argue, to ask the group to dismantle that structure and function like a political party operating in a long-established liberal democracy. An internal debate over management processes is taking place, however, and even though it will proceed at a slow pace and according to developments in Egyptian politics, it is likely to contribute to a decrease in internal fissures.

While these three factors are likely to reduce the impact of the fissures, it is arguable that a fourth, more philosophical consideration helps to place the phenomenon in perspective. Personal rivalries and ideological differences have characterised the Brotherhood from its early days. But when it comes to core issues, to a general view of what society should ideally look like, the disagreement is minimal. Before anything else, in fact, the Brotherhood is a school of thought, a common frame of reference through which its members see the world. In the long term, when possibly confronted with major decisions regarding Egyptian society and politics, all fractions and

subgroups are likely to cast their personal and ideological divisions aside and stand together. Once in parliament, whether they all sit together under the FJP banner or grudgingly side by side under the insignia of several competing political forces, individuals that come from the Brotherhood milieu are likely to vote as one bloc on core issues.

Electoral strategies

Since the fall of Mubarak, the Brotherhood has found itself involved in a delicate balancing act with a variety of entities. While the group seems to have found a surprisingly successful *modus vivendi* with the armed forces, almost paradoxically it appears to have been facing a significantly greater challenge in dealing with a movement that traces its roots to its very same ideological foundations: Salafism, a literalist and ultra-conservative movement that, over the last 20 years, has grown significantly in Egypt thanks in part to funding coming from Arab Gulf donors and the indirect support of the Mubarak regime, which fostered its growth to counterbalance the Brotherhood's influence.

The Salafist movement, in Egypt as elsewhere, is not as unified and hierarchical as the Brotherhood. Rather, it is better understood as a hodgepodge of doctrinally splintered local clusters. While some Salafists have engaged in high-profile acts of violence since the fall of Mubarak, the most remarkable recent development in Egyptian Salafism is its sudden infatuation with the political process. Salafists have traditionally accused the Brothers, with whom they otherwise agree on many theological interpretations, of compromising their principles for participating in politics. Since the revolution, however, most Salafists have engaged in a variety of political activities, from forming parties to staging mass demonstrations. There are no reliable indications as to how large the Salafist movement in the country is or how Salafi parties would fare in election. There is no question that Salafists are not as organised or politically savvy as the Brothers, but the enthusiasm surrounding their efforts has surprised many, Brothers included.

On one hand, the Brothers have considered the positives in the growth of the Salafist movement. First, the presence of this outwardly radical and occasionally violent movement allows the Brotherhood to present itself to Egyptian voters and international observers as the moderate,

rational version of Islamism. Moreover, it could provide a formidable source of votes, as the Brothers have traditionally regarded Salafists as part of their natural electoral basin. Brotherhood strategists have initially calculated that either Salafists would vote directly for the FJP or, even assuming they could form relatively viable political entities that would enter parliament, such entities would consistently vote with the FJP.

However, the sudden growth of the Salafists is slowly being perceived as threatening by the Brotherhood. While the Brothers are forced to weigh every word they utter in order not to upset the military, centrist Egyptian voters, and international observers, Salafists have no such concerns and openly express their uncompromising views about vague but catchy concepts such as social justice and an Islamic state. Brotherhood strategists fear the group is being "out-Islammed" by Salafists, whose outward piety and simple messages might chip away important cross-sections of what the Brotherhood considers its natural electorate.

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The rise of the Salafist movement has created a dilemma for the Brotherhood, which must now compete with the Salafists in order to obtain the votes of the most conservative cross-sections of the electorate or appear as a modern, democratic-leaning force. The Brotherhood will most likely try to do both, although the success of this approach remains to be seen. This challenge is arguably just one of the many balancing acts the group is involved in. Looking ahead, for example, the Brotherhood is also concerned about avoiding a Gaza-like scenario, where Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections caused most Western powers to isolate the group. The Brotherhood understands that, if it were to surge to power, it will need to reconcile its Islamist agenda somewhat with the potential implications of its implementation.

In that regard, the model towards which the Egyptian Brothers are looking is the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP comes from an Islamist background and, since coming to power in 2002, has pursued several policies of Islamist inspiration. While relations with both the Turkish military and the West

have been tense, they have not degenerated, and the AKP is firmly holding on to power. Although there are plenty of social and political differences between Egypt and Turkey, the Brothers are seeking to learn from the AKP's experience. The AKP's success in economic policies is also of particular interest to the Brothers, who are fully aware that reconstructing the Egyptian economy will be a priority in the near future.

The desire to avoid negative external pressures might lead the Brotherhood to opt for a relatively less visible role in a future Egyptian government. Calculations will only make sense after the elections, but the Brothers might be leaning towards avoiding the role of prime minister or the ministries of economy or foreign affairs. Rather, they might concentrate on ministries that focus on education and social affairs. Bottom-up Islamisation of society has always been the Brotherhood's main focus, and politics has traditionally been ancillary to *dawa* (preaching). For the time being, it might make sense for a calculating and politically savvy force like the Brotherhood to bide its time, concentrate on low profile societal efforts that are propaedeutic to the fulfillment of its vision, and avoid attracting negative attention.

Implications for the West

It remains to be said that the situation in Egypt is much too fluid and chaotic to make any prediction about developments even within a few months. Egypt is having its first experience with real democracy and none of the players, including the Brothers, have any idea where this experiment will take them and the country. In this climate of uncertainty, it can be argued that a "wait and see" approach is the wisest for Western policy-makers. In June this year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US had established limited contacts with the Brotherhood, a policy the EU has long adopted. It seems pragmatic and farsighted to enter into some form of dialog with a force that is likely to play a major role in Egypt's future – and the same policy should arguably be applied to other non-violent Islamist forces in other countries of the region.

Nevertheless, the expectations for this engagement should be kept low, as there

are reasons to be wary about some of the group's stances. The former head of the Brotherhood, Mohammed Akef, for example, stated in June that "our preliminary platform will be shown through the Freedom and Justice Party, but our full platform will not be disclosed until we are in complete control and take the presidency as well." This and similar statements have been dismissed by the more media-savvy elements of the Brotherhood as unrepresentative of the group's thinking, but they have understandably given many reason for pause.

Domestically, it is unclear where the Brothers stand on issues such as women and religious minorities' rights. There are even greater concerns when it comes to the Brothers' views on various foreign policy issues, particularly regarding Israel and Egypt's peace treaty with it. Although a greater animosity towards Israel is shared by large sections of the Egyptian population and virtually all political forces of post-Mubarak Egypt, the Brothers have made anti-Israeli sentiments a cornerstone of their worldview and have close ties to Hamas, the movement's Palestinian branch. Given the already deteriorating relations between Israel and Egypt, it is reasonable for Western policy-makers to be concerned about the role of a Brotherhood-dominated government in such a delicate matter.

Given this uncertainty and the group's many ambiguities, for the time being, a low-profile engagement based on a firm understanding of its ideology, internal structure, and modus operandi might be the best way for Western policymakers to interact with the Brotherhood.

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