



PolicyWatch 1918

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Pursues a Political Monopoly

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On Saturday, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) announced the nomination of Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater for president, cementing a critical shift in its political strategy. Although the group initially tried to manage Egypt's post-Mubarak transition by cooperating with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and secularist parties, it is now pursuing outright political dominance. The MB's reversal of its oft-repeated pledge not to run a presidential candidate also suggests that it cannot be trusted if it decides there is an advantage to be won. More broadly, the Brotherhood's pursuit of a political monopoly undermines prospects for democracy in Egypt and threatens to intensify political instability -- a scenario that should deeply alarm U.S. policymakers.

COOPERATIVE FACADE CRUMBLES

Following President Hosni Mubarak's February 2011 ouster, the MB sought to allay secularist fears of an Islamist takeover by adopting a cooperative political approach and tempering its pursuit of power. Specifically, the Brotherhood made two promises: that it would contest fewer than half of the seats in eventual parliamentary elections, and that it would not run for the presidency. In June 2011, it emphasized its commitment to cooperation by joining the secularist Wafd Party in creating the National Democratic Alliance for Egypt, an electoral coalition that, at its height, included forty-three parties.

This cooperative approach was a facade, however. In October, the MB reportedly insisted that 40 percent of the Democratic Alliance's parliamentary candidates come from its own ranks, catalyzing the defection of thirty parties, including the Wafd. Shortly thereafter, the Brotherhood backtracked on its first promise, ultimately running for at least 77 percent of the seats in parliamentary elections that concluded this January. Then, after winning a 47 percent plurality in those elections, the MB ensured its dominance over the legislature by appointing Brotherhood-aligned chairs to fourteen of nineteen parliamentary committees.

Last month, the MB further alienated secularist parties by monopolizing the legislatively appointed Constituent Assembly, which will write Egypt's next constitution. MB political leader and parliamentary speaker Saad al-Katatni was named chairman of the assembly, and approximately 65 of the body's 100 members are affiliated with Islamist parties, including 27 Brotherhood and 12 Salafist parliamentarians. By contrast, only 16 seats were reserved for secularists, 5 for Christians, and 6 for women.

The Brotherhood's actions have catalyzed a significant political crisis. When the Constituent Assembly's first session opened on March 28, twenty-five members had already resigned in protest, and representatives from al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church resigned shortly thereafter. The MB has shown little willingness to make the body more inclusive of non-Islamists. Indeed, Brotherhood parliamentarian Subhi Saleh lashed out at the resignations, declaring that the assembly would not "fall hostage to the dictatorship of the minority."

Meanwhile, prominent lawyers filed suit against the assembly, arguing that the inclusion of parliamentarians in such a body is unconstitutional; a verdict is due April 10. If the current Constituent Assembly is not invalidated, Egypt's next constitution will lack legitimacy with a significant portion of the voting public -- a situation that will undermine attempts at establishing a culture of legal rationalism.

THE DEMISE OF BROTHERHOOD-SCAF DETENTE

The MB's cooperation with the SCAF proved only slightly more durable. The group's February 2011 promise not to run a presidential candidate was, in part, a vow not to contest the junta's executive authority, which the Brotherhood feared might invite an Algeria-like crackdown. The MB further reassured the SCAF by helping to draft proposed constitutional amendments that contained the council's program for political transition, and by endorsing those measures in a March 2011 referendum. When pro-democracy activists later stepped up their protests against the SCAF's repressive rule, the Brotherhood mostly stood aside and minimized its own criticisms of the junta.

This detente seemingly solidified following the Brotherhood's parliamentary victory, when the group appointed a former general to chair the sensitive Defense and National Security Committee. The MB also used its legislative preponderance to discourage criticism of the council, such as by investigating a secularist parliamentarian for allegedly insulting SCAF chair Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi.

The relationship soured last month, however, when parliament demanded the dismissal of the SCAF-appointed government for lifting travel bans on American pro-democracy NGO workers. By implicitly challenging the council's executive power, which includes the power to appoint the government, the legislature exceeded its constitutional authority; in response, rumors surfaced that the SCAF might challenge the parliament's constitutional legitimacy. A war of words soon broke out: the MB accused the SCAF of trying to "abort the revolution," while the council insinuated that it might crack down on the Brotherhood as the military did under Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1954.

The MB's nomination of Shater for president is a further escalation of this conflict, since it openly contests the SCAF's executive power. In a statement announcing the decision, the Brotherhood accused the council of disrupting the parliament's work, pressuring parties

to leave the Constituent Assembly, and attempting to run a presidential candidate who would resurrect autocracy. Given the SCAF's political and economic stake in the dispute and its record of repressing other critics, the confrontation threatens to destabilize Egypt's already tenuous political environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

By renegeing on two oft-repeated political promises, the Brotherhood has exposed its true aims. Its foremost priority is dominating Egyptian politics, and any assurances that it makes to the contrary cannot be trusted. Moreover, Western observers were not alone in being surprised by Shater's nomination -- even midlevel MB officials were caught off guard, which suggests that decisionmaking remains concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of top Brotherhood leaders.

Three potential scenarios show the danger inherent in the MB's dictatorial internal structure and power-hungry ambitions. First, if Shater wins the presidential election currently scheduled for late May, an emboldened Brotherhood would likely push harder for the military to relinquish many of its perquisites (e.g., budgetary autonomy and control over major industries), which could set the stage for a violent showdown. An MB political monopoly would also invite intensified protests from secularists, who are already accusing the Brotherhood of behaving like Mubarak's former ruling party. Meanwhile, the group would no doubt use its dominant position to carry out an oppressive theocratic agenda (e.g., repealing the ban on female genital mutilation, as one female MB parliamentarian recently advocated), which would exacerbate domestic tensions.

Alternatively, if Shater loses to a SCAF-backed candidate, the Brotherhood would likely contend that the voting was fraudulent (in fact, the MB is already accusing the council of planning to steal the election). In this scenario, the group could use its parliamentary dominance to undermine the legitimacy of both the presidency and the military, causing an extended political crisis.

Shater could also lose to Salafist presidential candidate Hazem Abu Ismail. In this case, Egypt would effectively become a competitive theocracy, alienating non-Islamists and spurring them to either challenge the new regime's legitimacy or emigrate.

To be sure, other scenarios are possible. Yet it is difficult to imagine one in which the Brotherhood's pursuit of political monopoly enhances the country's prospects for stability, given the group's exclusivist ideology and determination to dominate. Egypt is facing a severe economic crisis and could go bankrupt later this year. A perpetual MB-SCAF power struggle might therefore turn the impoverished country of 80 million people into a failed state. For Washington, this would be the worst scenario, endangering efforts to achieve America's three primary interests in Egypt: strategic cooperation, political pluralism, and regional peace.

At the same time, consolidating legislative and executive power will make it increasingly difficult for the Brotherhood to escape domestic political responsibility. This presents an important policy opportunity for Washington. As the MB inevitably looks abroad for help, Washington can condition its willingness to ensure Egypt's economic future on the Brotherhood's behavior. Specifically, the Obama administration should work with international allies to develop a credible economic aid package that would be dispersed

incrementally, and only so long as the Brotherhood acts responsibly and helps in developing more-inclusive political institutions. Washington should use military aid in a similar fashion to hold the SCAF accountable.

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