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Meet the Islamist Political Fixer Who Could Be Egypt's Next President

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When Egypt's Presidential Elections Commission disqualified Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate Khairat al-Shater from the upcoming elections last week, the Brotherhood was angered, but not surprised. Egyptian law bans criminal convicts from running for president, and though al-Shater's 2007 conviction for belonging to an "illegal organization" -- namely, the Brotherhood -- was highly politicized, the Brotherhood knew that it could sink al-Shater's candidacy nonetheless. It thus nominated a last-minute backup: former parliamentarian Mohamed Morsi, who has now replaced al-Shater as the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate.

Morsi's sudden emergence as the Muslim Brotherhood's standard-bearer represents a tremendous change in his role within the organization. For much of the past decade, Morsi has been a behind-the-scenes player, performing two key functions that were vital to the Brotherhood's external security and internal discipline.

First, for the final four years of Hosni Mubarak's reign, Morsi was the primary point-of-contact for State Security within the Muslim Brotherhood. State Security was the repressive domestic security apparatus through which the Mubarak regime monitored and infiltrated opposition groups, and Morsi negotiated with State Security to ensure the Brotherhood's participation in various political endeavors, such as parliamentary elections. "Mohamed Morsi has very good security relations," former deputy supreme guide Mohamed Habib told me during a March 2011 interview. "State Security likes a connection point who has the confidence of various Brothers, and [top Brotherhood leaders] pushed for him." Indeed, Brotherhood leaders trusted Morsi because they viewed him as ideologically rigid, and therefore unlikely to concede too much to the regime during negotiations. Brotherhood leaders also believed that Morsi's longtime political experience,

including his membership in the Brotherhood's political division since 1992 and leadership of the Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc from 2000 to 2005, made him an effective negotiator.

Interestingly, Morsi inherited this role from Khairat al-Shater, the man whom he recently replaced as the Brotherhood's presidential candidate. Prior to the 2005 parliamentary elections, Morsi assisted al-Shater in negotiating with the regime over the number of candidates that the Brotherhood would run. When the Brotherhood won 88 of 454 total seats in parliament -- including a majority of the seats that they contested -- the regime was infuriated, and it is believed that its subsequent prosecution of al-Shater was, in part, a punishment for his failure to reduce sufficiently the number of Brotherhood candidacies. Following al-Shater's conviction, Morsi became the Brotherhood's sole liaison to State Security.

Morsi's willingness, in the years afterwards, to negotiate with a Mubarak regime that brutally repressed the Brotherhood for decades is a testament to the organization's political gradualism during that time. "Our program is a long-term one, not a short-term one," Morsi told me during an August 2010 interview. "If we are rushing things, then I don't think that this leads to a real stable position." Indeed, under Mubarak, the organization's primary aim was survival -- which is why it frequently coordinated its activities with the regime, and typically refused to join the various protest movements that emerged during the waning years of Mubarak's rule. "We never participate in some randomness movements before," Morsi told me in his stilted English. The Brotherhood thus initially refused to participate in the January 2011 mass demonstrations that ultimately toppled Mubarak. And despite having been arrested as the revolt reached its climax, Morsi participated in early February negotiations with then-vice-president Omar Suleiman that, unsuccessfully, aimed to end the protests.

Morsi's second function within the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership was similarly critical to the Brotherhood's integrity. He was, in the words of former Brotherhood youth Abdel Monem al-Mahmoud, "an icon of the extremists in the Muslim Brotherhood" -- someone who not only pushed the Brotherhood to adopt a more extreme agenda, but advocated for purging those leaders who disagreed with it.

In this vein, Morsi led the Brotherhood's 2007 efforts to draft a political platform that included provisions that restricted the Egyptian presidency to Muslim men and established a council of Islamic scholars to advise the parliament on sharia-compliant legislation. When young Brotherhood bloggers objected to these provisions, Morsi reprimanded them. Two years later, Morsi led the push to oust Mohamed Habib and Abdel Monem Abouel Fotouh from the Guidance Office, after both Brotherhood leaders voiced their disagreement with the political platform. "Habib left the Guidance Office because of an unnatural situation," Brotherhood parliamentarian Mohamed al-Beltagi told me in a 2011 interview. "The members who ran for internal election...chose some people who are close to each other, to ensure unity regardless of efficiency...This was for the benefit of harmony in the Guidance Office."

Since Mubarak's ouster last February, Morsi has continued playing these roles as the chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which the Brotherhood established in April 2011. Indeed, Morsi has essentially remained the Brotherhood's key intermediary with the regime. He has negotiated with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces on a variety of matters, including the format and timing of the parliamentary elections, as well

as ending episodes of renewed mass protests.

He has also used his continued influence within the Brotherhood to ensure that the organization's rank-and-file are committed exclusively to the FJP. In this vein, when younger Brotherhood leaders opposed the establishment of the FJP and began forming their own youth-oriented party, Morsi ordered them to back down. "There are people who think they're the temple guards, and he's one of them," Brotherhood youth leader Islam Lotfy told me shortly after last year's revolt. "He cares a lot about the system, more than the people." In June 2011, Lotfy and his colleagues formed the Egyptian Current Party, and were subsequently banished from the Brotherhood. Similarly, when Abouel Fotouh, whom Morsi ousted from the Guidance Office in 2009, declared his presidential candidacy against the Brotherhood's wishes, he and his supporters were exiled.

With Morsi now in the spotlight as the Brotherhood's presidential candidate, the nature of his previous work within the Brotherhood could have a mixed effect on his electoral prospects. While the Brotherhood's members and supporters are widely expected to vote for him, the vote of Egyptian Salafists -- whose candidates won nearly a quarter of the parliamentary vote -- remains up for grabs. (The Salafists' presumed candidate, Hazem Abu Ismail, was disqualified last week when it was discovered that his mother was an American citizen.) On the one hand, Morsi's doctrinal rigidity -- for example, his stubborn refusal to entertain the notion of a Christian presidential candidate -- could appeal to Salafists, who embrace a more fundamentalist version of Islam. Morsi is, after all, the most conservative Islamist still in the race.

On the other hand, his status as the Brotherhood's quintessential "organization man" could alienate Salafists, who view the Brotherhood's intricate national structure as superfluous to their broader aim of living according to a strict interpretation of the sharia. Morsi's behavior as FJP chair has further turned off Salafist political leaders, who defected from the FJP's electoral coalition when Morsi reserved 40 percent of the coalition's candidacies for the FJP, thereby limiting Salafist candidacies.

No matter how he fares in the presidential race, however, Morsi will likely remain a fixture in Egyptian politics for years to come. His leadership of the FJP, which holds plurality-control of the parliament, will enable him to continue steering the Brotherhood's political trajectory towards the theocratic far-right. His commitment to the organization's internal discipline will mitigate against a push by younger members to embrace compromise with other political factions. And his longtime relationship with Egyptian security authorities will make him one of the most important figures for fending off political pressure from the Egyptian military.

Still, Morsi's emergence as the Brotherhood's standard-bearer should be taken as an indicator of the organization's modus operandi. It is internally dictatorial, ideologically intolerant, and -- perhaps most importantly -- only willing to embrace political gradualism when pressured by stronger authorities.

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