

The Muslim Brotherhood Thinks It's Winning Again

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Articles & Testimony

Given the Brotherhood's persistent and dangerous delusion, the existential struggle that has defined Egyptian politics since Morsi's removal will likely worsen.

Since the uprising-cum-coup that ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi last summer, Washington has encouraged the Muslim Brotherhood and the military-backed government to pursue "reconciliation." Nearly a year later, however, neither side appears interested in conceding anything to the other. The military fears that a remobilized Brotherhood would quickly win power and seek vengeance. And despite an unrelenting crackdown that has claimed over 2,500 lives and jailed over 16,000 Egyptians, the Brotherhood's demands haven't softened: Morsi must return, at least temporarily, and those who removed him -- particularly General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who is widely expected to win the presidential election next week -- must be executed. Until then, Muslim Brothers vow to continue resisting the coup, because -- they insist -- they are winning. In other words, forget "reconciliation": The existential struggle that has defined Egyptian politics since Morsi's removal will likely continue, and worsen.

To be sure, there has been ongoing communication -- sometimes direct, but mostly indirect -- between the military-backed government and the Brotherhood since July. But the two sides' demands remain mutually exclusive. While the Brotherhood often downplays its demand that Morsi return to power, it still emphasizes the restoration of "legitimacy," which effectively means the same thing. "The return of Morsi, continuing his rule, is not what we want," Mohamed Touson, a former Brotherhood parliamentarian and a member of Morsi's legal team, told me, before adding: "Morsi should come back just to take the decision for new elections and leave office."

The Brotherhood is also demanding "transitional justice" -- a phrase that Brotherhood leaders deliberately borrowed from post-apartheid South Africa, but then stripped of its conciliatory significance. According to one Brotherhood leader, the Brotherhood wants to appoint an "independent committee" to investigate security forces' deadly crackdown on the Brotherhood's anti-coup protests, "and the results will be compulsory for everyone, with the killings...considered murders" -- meaning that Sisi and many of his colleagues would be convicted of mass murder

and put to death. Younger Muslim Brothers are particularly emphatic on this point. "He should be executed when the coup falls," said a Brotherhood student at Cairo University. Of course, the military won't accept a set of demands that entail the generals' deaths.

The military's demands are similarly non-starters for the Brotherhood. According to Emad Abdel Ghafour, a former Morsi adviser who serves as a liaison between the Brotherhood and top generals, the military is willing to release all but 300 of the Muslim Brothers that have been arrested. On paper, this is a major concession, because it would mean that over 10,000 detained Muslim Brothers could go home. But the 300 Muslim Brothers whom the military wants to keep imprisoned are likely top leaders, and given the Brotherhood's hierarchical command-chain, this would mean accepting its own decapitation. The military is also demanding that the Brotherhood participate in the post-Morsi political process -- another non-starter for the Brotherhood, because this would mean recognizing the legitimacy of Morsi's overthrow.

Beyond standing on principle, however, Brotherhood leaders refuse to compromise on their core demands for two reasons. First, they fear an insurrection from rank-and-file Muslim Brothers, many of whom lost friends and relatives in the deadly crackdown on the Brotherhood's main "anti-coup" protests in August. "The youth who saw blood understand only the language of revolution," said Abdullah al-Mehy, a Brotherhood youth who fled to Turkey and now serves as an anchor on the Brotherhood's Istanbul-based satellite television channel. "So they require a settlement that satisfies what they witnessed." Brotherhood leaders are thus keenly aware that pursuing "reconciliation" without holding the current regime accountable will divide their organization. "If we judge who is responsible for blood, then we can have dialogue," said one leader.

Second, Brotherhood leaders believe -- despite all available data -- that they are winning. "The aim of the coup was to eliminate political Islam," said Brotherhood leader Gamal Heshmat, who fled to Istanbul in December. "But the coup in Egypt had the opposite effect...It restored confidence in the Brotherhood, when people compared [their experience] under Dr. Morsi to what happened afterwards." Touson, Morsi's lawyer, was similarly upbeat. "I don't believe there's a coup in the world that faces resistance like this," he said, referring to the ongoing -- and increasingly sparse -- Brotherhood-led demonstrations against Morsi's ouster.

The Brotherhood's lack of realism is nothing new. Claiming to represent "true Islam," the Brotherhood has long overestimated its popularity within Muslim-majority Egypt, and its leaders therefore cannot believe that Egyptians actually rebelled against an Islamist president. ("On June 30, nothing happened on the streets," Heshmat said, flatly denying that many millions of Egyptians participated in the anti-Brotherhood protests that preceded Morsi's ouster.) And precisely because the Brotherhood believes that it is winning, it sees little reason to compromise.

Yet the Brotherhood isn't winning at all -- in fact, it's at its weakest point in nearly four decades, and its notoriously rigid organization is in total disarray. Within urban centers, the Brotherhood's five-to-eight-member cells, known as "families," haven't held their weekly meetings since Morsi was ousted, and Muslim Brothers say they can only meet each other one or two at a time.

Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's top leadership hasn't met since late July. And although new leaders have been promoted to replace those who have been imprisoned, Muslim Brothers don't actually know who is strategizing on their behalf. "Those who manage, I don't know them and nobody knows them," said Heshmat, the Brotherhood leader exiled in Istanbul. While Mohamed Ali Bishr, a former Brotherhood executive who served as a governor and minister under Morsi, often speaks on behalf of the group within Egypt, Muslim Brothers and their allies are unsure whether top Brotherhood leaders have entrusted him with any actual authority. One Brotherhood leader said that deputy supreme guide Gomaa Amin, who is currently exiled in London and chronically ill, is running the organization. But Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Riad al-Shaqfeh, who is based in Istanbul, says that secretary-general Mahmoud Hussein has presided over the group's international meetings since Supreme Guide Mohamed

Badie was arrested in August.

Even without knowing their leaders, however, young Muslim Brothers continue to follow the orders that they receive through Brotherhood-affiliated social media sites. On campuses, for example, Muslim Brothers receive information about upcoming "anti-coup" demonstrations through Facebook, and they promise to continue fighting the current regime despite the significant risk this entails. "Everybody is looking [to be a martyr]," said the Muslim Brother at Cairo University, whose brother was killed during last summer's crackdown. "There are [people] younger than me looking for paradise. And when I did not get that honor, I said God did not let me [become a martyr] because I made many mistakes." Al-Mehy, the Brotherhood youth in Istanbul, was similarly resolute: "We will continue to resist the coup until the last drop," he said. "Because we tasted freedom and we will not accept to go back and taste slavery again."

This is perhaps the main reason why "reconciliation" won't happen: Many Muslim Brothers would rather die fighting the current regime than sit with it.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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