# Hussein Morsi: My Brother's Presidency 'Was a Disaster'

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Articles & Testimony

## While Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is hardly on the cusp of a dramatic comeback, it retains legions of members and active rural cells that are committed to its power-seeking program.

Hussein Morsi looks almost exactly like his infamous brother, albeit 15 years younger with a slightly darker complexion. I'm not the first person to have told him so. Shortly after the Egyptian military overthrew Mohamed Morsi on July 3, Hussein was stopped at a military checkpoint while driving from his home in the Nile Delta to the Muslim Brotherhood's mass anti-coup demonstration in Cairo. "If they saw someone [heading to the demonstration], they would grab him," Hussein told me. But the on-duty soldier immediately guessed that he was related to the deposed president and let him pass unharmed.

To some extent, the Morsi family's experience over the past three years epitomizes the Muslim Brotherhood's quick rise and epic fall. The Morsis, after all, watched their eldest brother go from being a barely-known Brotherhood leader to Egypt's first civilian president to, finally, the country's best-known prisoner -- all within a span of 30 months.

But as is often the case, the whiplash-inducing pace with which Egyptian elites are shuffled in and out of power is barely felt by non-elites, particularly those living in Egypt's vast countryside. And despite their relation to Egypt's deposed president, whom his youngest brother awkwardly referred to as "Dr. Morsi" throughout our conversation, the Morsis are hardly elites. The family hails from Al-Adwa, an impoverished village in the Sharkiya governorate, where Morsi's siblings still control the two acres of land that their father received through Nasser's land-reform program in the 1950s.

Indeed, Mohamed Morsi's rise to the presidency bestowed no benefits on Hussein, who continued teaching high school math. During Mohamed's year in office, Hussein never even entered the presidential palace, though he visited his brother a few times at his home in the Cairo suburb of al-Tagammu al-Khamis and spoke to him regularly on the phone. And even as President Morsi's popularity declined rapidly and sparked a mass "Rebellion" movement

that culminated in his ouster, Hussein barely felt the impact: Al-Adwa is a Brotherhood stronghold, so Hussein confronted only a few critics of his brother's performance and witnessed no anti-Morsi protests. ("They don't dare!" he exclaimed, when I asked whether the "Rebellion" movement had any noticeable presence in Al-Adwa.)

By the same token, the current government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, which has forced the organization underground in the major cities, hasn't had much of an impact on its activities within Al-Adwa. In Cairo, for example, the Brotherhood has suspended the regular meetings of its five-to-eight-member cells known as *usras*, and has urged its cadres to work on behalf of the organization individually, such as by trying to improve the Brotherhood's reputation in conversations with neighbors. One Giza-based leader told me that phone communication is no longer safe for those Brotherhood officials who haven't been arrested, so they now send messages to each other via their daughters.

But according to Hussein Morsi, the Brotherhood's command chain in al-Adwa and the surrounding rural areas is still intact. The *usra* he heads continues to meet weekly -- the same frequency as before his brother's ouster -- and still collects its members' monthly dues, which remain seven to ten percent of each member's salary. The leadership of the local *shoaba*, a division within the Brotherhood's Leninist hierarchy that manages the work of six to twelve *usras*, is also functioning normally, and directly organizes the local Brotherhood-led marches demanding Morsi's return to power.

Hussein, who serves in his *shoaba's* administrative office, added that the head of his *shoaba* has continued to attend the regular meetings of the next tier in the Brotherhood's hierarchy, the *muntaqa*. And despite the arrest of many higher-ranking provincial and national Brotherhood leaders, the Brotherhood's provincial office in Sharkiya continues to disseminate orders that it receives from national Brotherhood leaders. For example, following major clashes in October between Brotherhood protesters and ordinary citizens opposing the organization, Muslim Brothers were ordered to refrain from retaliating when civilians attack them.

Given Hussein Morsi's relatively low position in the Brotherhood's nationwide hierarchy, he did not know exactly how the national leadership managed to maintain communication with the provincial leaders, because he has no personal access to these individuals. But he said that, on at least one occasion, a Brotherhood Guidance Office leader came to Sharkiya to meet with provincial leaders and distribute directives. He further revealed that, following Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie's imprisonment in August, the Brotherhood appointed a new chief. (The man whom Morsi named as the new Brotherhood leader has no public profile and has never served in a top leadership position within the organization previously; although I was able to verify this man's existence as a Muslim Brother, I could not confirm whether he was, in fact, the Brotherhood's acting Supreme Guide.)

The fact that the Brotherhood is still functioning even somewhat normally in Egypt's rural areas, despite a nationwide crackdown that has ensnared most of its top leaders, is good reason to question the widespread analysis that the organization cannot reemerge politically anytime soon. Much depends on what the Brotherhood's leadership, perhaps even at the local level, decides to do: If the Brotherhood decides to run its own candidates as independents or support candidates from other parties in the next parliamentary elections, which are slated for next year, it could regain at least a small share of the influence that it lost during the past five months. The Guidance Office, Morsi told me, had not yet decided on its policy for the next elections -- but if the Guidance Office decides to participate, he indicated, rank-and-file Brothers are prepared to resume political activities.

Not that Hussein Morsi was particularly enthralled by his brother's presidency. "I think it was a disaster," he told me, adding that the presidency is a "huge responsibility" and that his brother "made some mistakes." And far from improving his standing in Al-Adwa, his brother's presidency sometimes felt like a huge imposition. "We lost many of our rights," he said. "For example, when someone fought with my son, before I would fight about it. But [after Mohamed Morsi became president] I couldn't, because people would say that I'm doing it because my brother is

president."

Still, Hussein intends to keep fighting for his brother's reinstatement, which is a cause that unites rural and urban Muslim Brothers alike. "Everything will go back to its place," Morsi told me, echoing a Giza-based Brotherhood leader's similarly confident assertion that Sisi will be tried in court. Hussein vowed to continue following the orders he receives from the Brotherhood's command-chain in pursuit of the organization's political objectives.

Indeed, while the Brotherhood's leadership is severely depleted and its organization is barely functional in the major cities, it retains legions of members who are committed to its power-seeking program and rural cells that are still active. Of course, the Brotherhood is hardly on the cusp of a dramatic comeback, but the fact that it is far from dead means that the struggle for Egypt's future isn't over.

For countryside Muslim Brothers like Hussein Morsi, that's the way it's always been.

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