

How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Can Bounce Back

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Assuming the group is patient and willing to accept that the events of this summer are irreversible, it has several options for eventually regaining national influence.

There is zero chance he gets acquitted. Forget the protests. Forget the procedural twists and turns. That's all you need to know about deposed Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's trial, which began on Monday in a heavily fortified police academy just outside of Cairo. Its outcome is a foregone conclusion -- the product of a process whose sole goal is polishing the uprising-cum-coup that ousted Morsi this summer with a legalistic sheen.

That's not to say that Morsi would be found innocent in a fairer court. As top Muslim Brothers confirmed to me at the time, the former Egyptian leader participated in planning the Brotherhood's "response" to last winter's protests against his power-grabbing constitutional declaration during a December 4 meeting at his house. The following day, Brotherhood cadres attacked demonstrators outside the presidential palace, catalyzing clashes in which 10 people were killed and 748 were injured. Still, there is a reason why Morsi is not being tried alongside Egypt's former interior minister, whose officers reportedly assisted the Brotherhood in torturing protesters during that fateful standoff: because this trial is part of the interim government's political strategy to decapitate and thereby destroy the Brotherhood, which means more trials of the organization's top leaders will soon follow.

Ultimately, Egypt's military-backed government, which possesses far greater hard power and much stronger public support than the Brotherhood, is likely to win its current battle with the group. Moreover, the Brotherhood's constant -- and often chaotic -- demonstrations demanding Morsi's reinstatement have only enhanced the government's advantages, since the protests are violently dispersed while many Egyptians cheer approvingly. With all of its top leaders either arrested or on the run, its activities banned, and its assets seized by an Egyptian court, the Brotherhood is at the brink of destruction: Its notoriously hierarchical vanguard has been disrupted and the broader environment of fear further prevents its rank-and-file from organizing effectively.

Still, it is too soon to write off the Brotherhood, which has re-emerged twice now from supposed oblivion. Following

the February 1949 assassination of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, the group returned to political prominence through its support of the Free Officers' ouster of King Farouk in 1952. Then, decades after President Gamal Abdel Nasser's severe crackdown in 1954 that sent thousands of Muslim Brothers to prison, the Brotherhood resurfaced in the 1970s under the relative freedom that President Anwar Sadat afforded it, quietly rebuilding the nationwide command structure that enabled it to quickly win power once Hosni Mubarak fell in 2011.

So how might the Brotherhood bounce back? Here are three possibilities.

First, the Brotherhood could establish its operational headquarters abroad and, during a less repressive period back home, rebuild its links with the group's rank-and-file within Egypt through both digital and interpersonal networks. This would mean empowering top Brotherhood leaders who have managed to escape the country -- for example, Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein, who has been spotted in Turkey and Qatar, and Deputy Supreme Guide Gomaa Amin, who is in London -- to run and maintain the organization. To some extent, the Brotherhood is already laying the groundwork for this strategy, since it has shifted its media center to London and used this foreign outpost to encourage its cadres back in Cairo. Moreover, there are precedents for this strategy among Islamist groups: Ennahda adopted it during the 1990s and 2000s, when its leadership was based in London, and it quickly emerged as Tunisia's leading party following the 2011 revolution. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood similarly moved what remained of its leadership abroad following Hafez al-Assad's 1982 crackdown on the group, and it funded its members' housing and education in exile to preserve the organization. It is a strategy, however, that requires substantial patience. It took Ennahda nearly two decades to return to Tunisia, while the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood still has a limited presence within Syria after more than three decades in exile.

Second, lower-level Brotherhood leaders could rebuild the group's pyramidal command chain from the bottom up. After Morsi and his top-level Brotherhood colleagues are given virtual life sentences, leaders within the Brotherhood's widely dispersed administrative districts -- known as "areas" -- could coordinate to elect new provincial leaders and, thereafter, new national leaders. For this to be possible, however, lower-level Brotherhood leaders will have to focus in the short run on preserving the Brotherhood's local administrative units -- a mission that the organization's current tactic of agitating for Morsi's impossible return complicates significantly, since the resulting crackdowns prevent the Brotherhood from organizing and working at the local level. Much like the first strategy, this would also require patience, since it may take years before local Brotherhood units enjoy sufficient freedom for reconstituting leadership layers.

Third, lower-level Brotherhood leaders could decide to run for parliament as independents, thereby circumventing the ban on religious parties that will likely be in place under the new constitution. If Brotherhood leaders made this strategic decision, they might win an impressive number of seats. Dozens of candidates often compete for each parliamentary seat, which means that a candidate can often advance to a second round of voting with an otherwise small share of the total vote. Moreover, parliamentary districts may correspond with the Brotherhood's own internal administrative districts, and the organization's notorious group discipline would enable local units to mobilize campaigns far more efficiently than perhaps any other political party. By returning to parliament, the Brotherhood might once again win the political influence to agitate for its interests.

Each of these strategies, of course, depends on the Brotherhood -- or at least those Muslim Brothers not in jail -- accepting that the events of this summer are irreversible. That's not the kind of realism one expects in the short run from a profoundly ideological and power-hungry group. But it's an approach the group's leaders might be forced to embrace once Morsi and his high-ranking Brotherhood colleagues are inevitably convicted.

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

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