

In Power, But Not in Control

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Articles & Testimony

The Muslim Brotherhood may have the votes for now, but Egypt is a ship without a rudder.

In the sparsely decorated waiting area just outside the Kafr el-Sheikh governor's executive offices, a photo montage depicts the governor overlooking scenes from his Nile Delta province. The artwork is dedicated to "His Excellency, Governor Saad Pasha al-Husseini."

It's an awkward way to address Hussein, to say the least. The Ottoman honorific "pasha" was phased out after Egypt's 1952 revolution, and its aristocratic connotation hardly suits a man who only two years ago was living on the edge of the law as a top leader in the Muslim Brotherhood, then an outlawed Islamist organization that built its reputation on providing social services to Egypt's impoverished masses.

The Brotherhood, however, has embraced the newfound trappings of power with gusto. "They were in prison two years ago," an aide to Hussein tells me. "They enjoy the cars and apartments they get as officials."

Now that the Brotherhood has climbed to the top of Egypt's political heap, it is doing everything it can to stay there. Brotherhood officials emphasize that their string of electoral victories since Hosni Mubarak's ouster two years ago has given them "legitimacy" -- a word that Muslim Brothers reflexively invoke to defend everything from President Mohamed Morsy's mass appointment of Muslim Brothers to top political posts to his Nov. 22 constitutional declaration granting him total authority.

But despite the Brotherhood's political power, it exerts virtually no control. Ever since Morsy's constitutional declaration and the rushed constitution-writing process that followed, a series of mass demonstrations, workers' strikes, and police-versus-protester clashes have plunged the country into near-chaos. Egypt's already weak economy is now in free fall, episodic instability has forced the military to assume control over three cities along the Suez Canal, and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya -- a U.S.-designated terrorist organization -- has deployed members to patrol the mid-Nile city of Asyut.

The Brotherhood's single-minded pursuit of power has catalyzed significant resistance to its rule, and thus contributed to Egypt's instability. But the Islamist movement shows no sign of changing course, apparently believing that further consolidating its power is the only way it can stymie what it views as a broad conspiracy against its rule.

In interviews that I conducted during a recent trip to Egypt, leading Muslim Brothers overwhelmingly traced this supposed conspiracy back to "feloul," an Arabic term referring to "remnants" of the previous regime. "Feloul are working against Egypt," Governor Hussein told me. "They're extremely against the ruling system now because the [president] is from the Muslim Brotherhood."

Mohamed al-Beltagy, a former parliamentarian who now sits on the executive committee of the Brotherhood's political party, was even more explicit. "There is a part of the system that, until now, is still connected with the old regime," he said. "This is found in many of the [state] apparatuses, like the police, media, and judiciary."

During the first year of his presidency, Morsy and his Brotherhood colleagues have focused squarely on addressing the perceived threats to their power in two of these three institutions. In August, the Brotherhood-controlled Shura Council appointed a new slate of editors to the major state-run newspapers and fired journalists who were critical of the Brotherhood. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's critics in the private media were investigated for crimes ranging from "insulting Islam" to "insulting the president."

Brotherhood leaders still complain that the media is against them, but contend that the tide is turning. "The media is directed against the Nahda project," said former Brotherhood parliamentarian and labor leader Saber Abouel Fotouh, referring to the Brotherhood's political platform. "But now society hates the media."

The Brotherhood also moved against the judiciary in November, when Morsy's constitutional declaration temporarily put his edicts above judicial review. The Brotherhood later dispatched its cadres to protest outside the Supreme Constitutional Court, an effort to pressure judges just before they were prepared to rule on the legality of the Brotherhood-dominated constitution-writing body. And once the constitution was ratified, Morsy quickly appointed his own prosecutor general without consulting the Supreme Judicial Council, as required by law -- a move his critics decried as an attack on judicial independence.

Cornering the historically repressive Interior Ministry will likely come next. As Beltagy told me during his interview, he sees his future "role in civil-military relations and in restructuring and reforming the Interior Ministry."

Beltagy added that, among other measures, he would seek to "allow college graduates to train for police work," rather than limiting police training to graduates from police academies. When asked whether this meant allowing Muslim Brothers to enter the police force, Beltagy said that it was "the right of the Muslim Brotherhood to lift the ban" on Brotherhood enrollment that existed under Mubarak, but that the Brotherhood wouldn't seek any special privileges for its members.

Despite these assurances, Beltagy's statement regarding his anticipated "role" in "reforming" the Interior Ministry, which I first raised during a presentation at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy two weeks ago, created a major media firestorm in Egypt. Many Egyptians worry that allowing Muslim Brothers to enter the Interior Ministry would, over time, enable the Brotherhood to use the ministry as a tool for imposing its theocratic agenda. And the military's recent announcement that it has lifted its ban on admitting Muslim Brothers into its academy will likely heighten concerns about attempts to "Brotherhoodize" powerful institutions.

In response to my initial reporting, Beltagy disputed the notion that he would be "in charge" of Interior Ministry reform, which is how I interpreted his statement that security reform would be his "role." He also emphasized that this work would occur through the parliament once it reconvened following the next elections. But he still declined to explain what "restructuring and reforming the Interior Ministry" -- his words -- would entail, and the episode culminated in a debate, of sorts, between Beltagy and me on Egyptian television, in which Beltagy opted to attack me

personally as a "Zionist" and anti-Islamic rather than answer these questions.

Whether or not Beltagy ultimately explains the Brotherhood's specific plans for "reforming the Interior Ministry," Egyptians are right to be alarmed. All Muslim Brothers, after all, are bound by oath to "listen and obey" Brotherhood leaders, which raises important doubts about their willingness to follow other chains of command. Moreover, the Brotherhood has used violence against its critics in the recent past: When non-Islamists staged protests outside the presidential palace following Morsy's constitutional declaration, the Brotherhood dispatched its cadres to attack the demonstrators. As the New York Times reported, Morsi supporters tortured some of the protesters, "pressuring them to confess that they had accepted money to use violence in protests against [Morsy]."

For Brotherhood leaders, however, the "evidence" derived from these "interrogations" only affirms the broad conspiracy against them. "When we took some people there and interrogated them, they confessed that businessmen gave them money," Abouel Fotouh, the former Brotherhood parliamentarian, told me.

Yet the Brotherhood's power plays in these sensitive ministries have only further destabilized the country, undermining their ability to exercise control. When Morsy rammed the new constitution through in a referendum in December, the state-owned news site al-Ahram joined independent media sites in a two-day blackout in protest. Meanwhile, most Egyptian judges refused to supervise the referendum, forcing the vote to be held over two consecutive weekends to ensure sufficient coverage for Egypt's roughly 13,000 polling places. And as the tensions between Morsy and the Interior Ministry increased, police officers went on strike in at least 10 of 29 provinces.

Moving forward, the Brotherhood can therefore be expected to rely on two strategies in its bid to achieve control.

First, where possible, it will likely bypass the bureaucracies it now oversees. "The bureaucracy is the killer enemy for all these developmental initiatives -- it is a wild monster," Youth Minister Osama Yassin, one of eight Muslim Brothers in the Egyptian cabinet, told me. "And we are all working together to kill it." Yassin explained that he is attempting to create a "ministry without fences," in which the ministry would circumvent its own institutions so that services -- including cultural programs, camping activities, and employment trainings -- "go directly to the youth" or relevant NGOs.

Yassin denied that these services would be delivered through Muslim Brotherhood-controlled channels to advance his parent organization's political ambitions. However, the Brotherhood's performance in other ministries suggests that this is its modus operandi. The Brotherhood-run Ministry of Supply and Social Affairs, for instance, recently commissioned activists affiliated with the Brotherhood's political party to distribute below-market food commodities as a mechanism for winning popular support in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Similarly, the Brotherhood's political party announced on March 10 that it was considering legislation allowing the state to hire private security firms to restore security, given the absence of the police. Such a step would circumvent the "blackmail of the Interior Ministry by former regime loyalists," Abouel Fotouh told Ahram Online.

Of course, these attempts to use the Brotherhood's own networks in place of state institutions may enhance the movement's power in the short-run. But in the long run, this strategy promises to undermine the official institutions, thus weakening the Brotherhood's control.

Second, the Brotherhood will continue its bid to accumulate power through the upcoming parliamentary elections, under the apparent assumption that another victory will bolster its "legitimacy" and thereby enhance its control. "The Egyptian people admire and respect the Muslim Brotherhood," said Suez-based Brotherhood leader Abbas Abdel-Aziz, whom Morsy recently appointed to Egypt's Shura Council, the upper house of parliament. "Our history is well known and, until now, there's no other choice."

Local Brotherhood party leaders say that they are already focused on the elections, which in the aftermath of a recent

court decision remain unscheduled. The Brotherhood's final list of candidates, which will include many younger faces, is in the process of being approved, and the Brotherhood has run a "We Build Our Country" campaign that uses social services for attracting -- some say buying -- votes.

Yet far from enhancing its control, the Brotherhood's focus on the next election means that it is avoiding the critical choices that come with governing. Specifically, Egypt is facing a severe cash crisis, and this year's allocation for gas subsidies has already run out.

Brotherhood leaders insist that Egypt can stop the depletion of its cash reserves by focusing on attracting foreign investments and reining in corruption -- the latter of which echoes their firm belief in a massive feloul conspiracy against them. "It's not just about subsidies," Mohamed Nasr, a member of the Brotherhood party's economic team who previously worked at the World Bank, told me. "People would definitely be willing to see this kind of cut. But they have to see on the other hand that corruption has been fought against." Nasr asserted that 40 percent of the economy under the old regime went into people's pockets.

Brotherhood leaders promise that they will be willing to undertake "cruel steps," as Governor Hussein puts it, such as cutting subsidies or raising taxes -- but only after the parliamentary elections.

"These kinds of measures, in order ... to sell them to the people, you need to put them through the parliament," said Nasr, the economist. "They have to be debated [within] the parliament."

Yet given that Egypt is unlikely to have a new parliament before the end of the summer, the country is running out of time before the economic deterioration becomes a crisis. And even once a new parliament is seated, it is hard to imagine the Brotherhood reaching across the aisle to build the kind of broad political consensus that it says is necessary to achieve difficult but necessary economic reforms. After all, the Brotherhood accuses its non-Islamist critics of being "against democracy," given their opposition to a constitution that was affirmed via referendum.

"The Egyptian people don't like them," Governor Hussein told me, when I asked him why he thought the Brotherhood's relatively secular opponents were politically weak. "The Egyptian people have morals. ... [Non-Islamists] have culture [that] is not here. And that's not our mistake -- that's their fault."

No matter how many elections the Brotherhood wins or political titles it collects, it will likely to continue to see itself as engaged in two struggles -- a historic one against the old regime, and a more recent one against its non-Islamist critics. So rather than making the tough -- and politically unpopular -- decisions that governing requires, it will likely continue its focus on power consolidation.

But as resistance to the Brotherhood's domineering style escalates, nobody should mistake this power for control. The Brotherhood's deficient governance of Egypt and refusal to build political consensus, after all, is bringing the country closer to chaos day by day.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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