Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Set to Prevail Despite Policy Failures

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Brief Analysis

The following article is one of three to emerge from " ***Dateline Egypt and North Africa: Updates from the Field (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/dateline-egypt-and-north-africa-updates-from-the-field)*** *," a Policy Forum hosted by The Washington Institute on March 5. The other two are Aaron Zelin's op-ed '* ***Tunisia's Post-Revolution Blues (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisias-post-revolution-blues)*** *" and David Pollock's PolicyWatch "* ***Rule the Casbah: The Moroccan Monarchy's Delicate Balancing Act (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rule-the-casbah-the-moroccan-monarchys-delicate-balancing-act)*** *."*

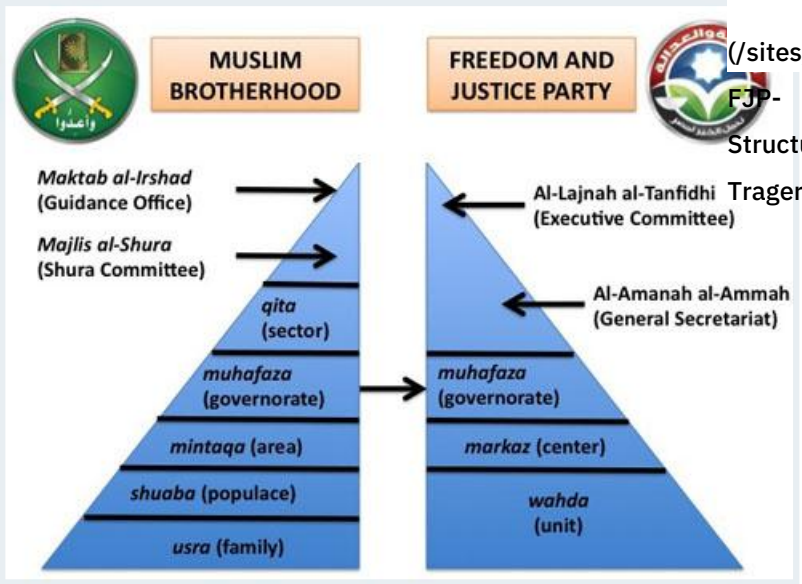
Despite declining domestic security, a cratering economy, and a host of other policy failures, the ruling Muslim Brotherhood will likely prevail in Egypt's next elections. Its political opponents are very weak, and the military appears unmotivated to reassert control, leaving the group with little internal pressure to focus on governance rather than power consolidation. As a result, only international pressure can influence the Brotherhood to undertake much-needed economic and political reforms.

ELECTORAL FOCUS

Despite the Brotherhood's string of electoral victories since Hosni Mubarak's February 2011 ouster, the Islamist organization is increasingly unpopular among Egyptians. Its inability to right the economy, its refusal to govern inclusively, and its violent attacks against non-Islamist critics have intensified resistance to its rule and catalyzed a new wave of destabilizing protests. In response, the Brotherhood has doubled down on its attempt to consolidate power, focusing on winning the forthcoming -- and still unscheduled -- parliamentary elections, which it views as essential to solidifying its political legitimacy.

Indeed, the group is already deep in electioneering mode. In late January, it launched the "We Are Building Our Country" campaign, through which it is distributing social services as a mechanism for winning -- and perhaps buying -- voter support. It is also in the process of selecting candidates: in February, it held internal elections in each governorate to choose its next batch of candidates, and the finalists are now being reviewed by the executive committee of its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP).

To organize its campaign activities, the Brotherhood has reshaped the FJP to mirror its own pyramidal chain of command. This new FJP structure can be used to quickly mobilize thousands of cadres as needed. The Brotherhood has also maintained direct control over the FJP's actions by shifting governorate-level leaders from Brotherhood administrative offices to the FJP's corresponding provincial headquarters.



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In addition, President Muhammad Morsi has appointed Brotherhood colleagues to key government posts that can be exploited for shaping electoral outcomes. In this vein, Local Development Minister Muhammad Ali Bishr, a former member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office, has redrawn electoral districts to favor the group's candidates; the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade, headed by Muslim Brother Bassem Ouda, recently allowed FJP workers to distribute below-market food commodities to potential voters in Beheira; and Information Minister Salah Abdel Maqsoud, another Muslim Brother, has appointed supporters of the group to head state-owned publications and television channels, with potentially major implications for the media campaign.

A DIVIDED, MISGUIDED OPPOSITION

Internal reshuffling aside, perhaps the best thing the Brotherhood has going for it politically is the ineffectual opposition. While the group's various failures in governance have intensified outcry against its rule, its opponents remain deeply divided ideologically and strategically.

Salafists are likely the Brotherhood's strongest rivals, given their second-place finish in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections. But a recent split in the dominant Salafist party's leadership may undercut the constituency's vote share in the next round. Top leaders from the Nour Party -- the political arm of the national Salafist organization al-Dawa al-Salafiya -- defected late last year following a dispute with al-Dawa leader Sheikh Yasser Borhami, establishing the rival Watan Party. Although the Nour Party will still benefit from al-Dawa's nationwide social services networks for mobilizing supporters, Watan is reportedly making inroads with sheikhs in local governments, who will encourage their followers to endorse the upstart party. Watan may also align with populist Salafist preacher Hazem Abu Ismail's political movement as well as al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization; both moves could expand Watan's support while diluting support for Salafists overall.

Non-Islamists, by contrast, are uncommonly unified at the top. The National Salvation Front, founded late last year in opposition to the Brotherhood-dominated constitutional process, has brought together top liberal, leftist, and old regime figures to counter the Brotherhood's political agenda. Yet these figures exert little real control over members

of their parties, which has had two harmful consequences.

First, while many non-Islamist leaders privately express their preference for participating in the next elections, pressure from lower-level party members has compelled them to endorse a boycott. The leadership believes that participating in existing political institutions is the best way to challenge the Brotherhood, but the activists view these institutions as the product of an illegitimate constitutional process that Morsi hastily manufactured to enhance the Brotherhood's power. The leaders' unwillingness to prevail upon their rank-and-file members reflects their tenuous legitimacy even within their own bases, illustrating the long-term challenge that non-Islamists face in building a serious alternative to the Brotherhood.

Second, non-Islamist leaders have been unable to rein in activist violence, which has increased since Brotherhood cadres attacked protestors outside the presidential palace on December 5. Activists argue that their retaliatory attacks on Brotherhood and FJP headquarters are intended to deter the group from using violence as a repressive tool in the future. Moreover, some activists advocate violence as a mechanism for creating chaos that will force the military to reassert control -- a prospect that non-Islamist leaders have at times welcomed, thereby implicitly encouraging the tactic. Yet so long as its economic interests and relative autonomy remain unthreatened, the military is unlikely to play a direct political role, especially in light of its unhappy experience ruling Egypt following Mubarak's ouster.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

Given the deep divisions among its opponents and the military's distaste for governing, the Muslim Brotherhood can prevail politically despite failing in policy. Therefore, if left to its own devices, the group will have little incentive to implement crucial reforms, which it fears would bolster its opponents and undermine its pursuit of greater power. The Brotherhood also expects foreign economic aid to continue flowing even after it wins the next parliamentary elections, since other governments will want to maintain relations with Cairo.

Accordingly, Washington should challenge the Brotherhood's assumption that it can avoid important reforms without paying a diplomatic price. In particular, the Obama administration should tell the group that its focus on power consolidation at the expense of governance is destabilizing Egypt, and that the international community will not bolster a government that exerts little domestic control while overseeing a rapidly deteriorating economy. Washington should back up this warning by conditioning all future economic aid -- along with support for the $4.8 billion loan that Cairo still hopes to obtain from the International Monetary Fund -- on the Morsi government's willingness to undertake key economic reforms such as reducing subsidies.

Finally, the administration should begin speaking out more forcefully against the Brotherhood's increasingly repressive rule. This would counter the widely held belief that the United States is backing the Brotherhood -- an impression that Washington should be eager to avoid given the group's failing governance. Such rhetoric would also make aid conditionality more credible by signaling that the United States is invested in righting Egypt's long-term economic prospects, not in boosting the Brotherhood's immediate power ambitions.

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